

LIVING BETWEEN THE CALL AND THE BURDEN: TEACHER STORIES OF BURNOUT

by

GREGORY SCOTT MEYER

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2001

B.Ed., The University of British Columbia, 2003

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## **Abstract**

Teachers live in a space between the calling and the burden – between the impulse to teach and the everyday stressors of teaching. According to research related to workplace stress, burnout is the result of long-term stress which has not been addressed over time. Teacher burnout is a major problem and is on the rise in British Columbia. In this thesis, I identify and describe the phenomenon of teacher burnout through teachers' stories, and document ways teachers avoid and cope with stress and burnout. I interviewed six teachers in a focus group. Since they knew each other as fellow students in a Master's program, a feeling of trust, empathy, confidentiality, and safety had already been established. As a result, the teachers disclosed their emotional and raw stories around stress and burnout. As a methodology, I use narrative inquiry to create meaning out of the teachers' lived experiences around burnout and coping with stress. I use autoethnography to engage my own personal voice and stories as a teacher, enabling me to examine the cultural aspects of burnout by considering the social contexts in which it occurs. From my analysis of the literature on teacher burnout and the teachers' stories (including my own), four themes emerge: stability, relationships, control, and culture/acclimation. As a framework, I locate the four themes between the call and the burden.

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for Behnoosh and Shaya

*Always*

## **PROLOGUE**

**In the beginning,  
I never wanted to be a teacher...**



## THE CALLING

I never wanted to be a teacher.

I started my university life with the desire to graduate with a degree in business. Looking back, I think much of my ambition was fueled by dreams of money and fast cars.

I enjoy writing. So, after failing an economics course, I turned my attention to English. But about mid-way through that degree, I realized that knowledge of Milton and Chaucer, and an ability to translate Old English texts, wouldn't open a lot of occupational doors.

By my third year at university, with graduation looming, I didn't feel a calling toward any particular field or profession. I was lost.

That summer I noticed my student loan funds were dangerously low. Since the next installment wasn't slated to rejuvenate my account until September, I was forced to seek summer employment. Surveying the newspaper and viewing the university posting board didn't prove fruitful. Most employment opportunities were uninteresting to me or required experience I didn't have. So, rather than sitting at home, I decided to help a girlfriend who was volunteering at a local community centre. To be honest, my intentions were purely selfish. I was hoping to secure some amorous time during her breaks. However, any such romantic attempts promptly disappeared as I found myself thoroughly preoccupied with fighting off children in the community centre water fights.

By the end of the hydro warfare I knew what I wanted to do for my summer break - work with children. So, for the remainder of that summer (and three consecutive summers thereafter) I volunteered

and was later hired as a camp leader for inner-city children in an Eastside Vancouver community.

I quickly realized the important role that I could play in the lives of young children. Many of the kids in my camp came from broken and/or impoverished homes. Parents were virtually non-existent. Likely many were working more than one job. Despite my efforts, I didn't have contact with most of the parents the entire summer; their children would arrive at the camp alone at 8:30 a.m. (many often arriving before me) and leave the camp alone at 3:30 p.m. (many wanting to stay longer). I was one stable adult in the lives of these special children.

Time and again, students came to the camp unkempt and without breakfast. Although the camp was only supposed to serve one meal and a snack, I stretched the camp funds strategically to feed the kids breakfast and lunch. As for hygiene, well, we went swimming a lot.

During July and August my life revolved around those kids. I spent evenings phoning local businesses asking for donations. I devoted hours planning creative, fun, and cheap camp activities. I was often on the phone speaking with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. I lost many nights of sleep worrying about my kids. By the end of the summer I was exhausted. Despite the emotional and physical drain, my summers as a camp leader were some of the best of my life. I left the camp each day tired, but satisfied with the thought that I was making a difference. These children were my family. And, as summer came to a close, I cried as the kids prepared to move on.

By September, as I again entered the monotony of academic life, I finally felt my calling. I'd made a difference in the lives of children. I felt motivated and energized. And, selfishly, I had gained remarkable satisfaction from my efforts during my summer camp experiences. I felt I had a natural talent and ability to work with kids and I wanted

to continue. I spent the final years of my undergraduate degree acquiring the prerequisites for admission into the Faculty of Education.

I never wanted to be a teacher. But I never really thought about being a teacher. I was lost, then I was found.

**And then,  
I walked into a very hostile environment...**

## THE BURDEN

Two years as a Teacher-On-Call (TOC) had taken its toll. Emotionally and physically I was exhausted. Nevertheless, I was finally in a position to get my first full-time teaching contract.

I was called for an interview shortly after the winter holidays. While sitting in the school office, the principal got straight to the point:

“Although your seniority is low, many of the applicants above you have refused the job. Basically I need a teacher who can handle a grade 7 class from hell. I want you to know that before you consider the position.”

Five people ahead of me in seniority turned down the contract. Although worn out from my years as a TOC, I decided to accept the position since it was an opportunity to move higher on the district’s seniority list. As well, I would finally receive medical and dental benefits and a stable income. I accepted the placement. Pay the price now for the chance at a steady teaching job.

I entered the class two weeks after the start of the second term. The teacher before me had taken an undisclosed leave of absence. Prior to my arrival in January, this class had a new TOC every day for two weeks. Five did not finish the day; some apparently went home in tears before the lunch break.

I walked into a very hostile environment. I spent my first two weeks trying to get control of a class that was used to running the show. They were a powerful group. If I had to pick a positive attribute to describe this class, I would say they worked well as a team. I quickly realized that if they couldn’t do what they wanted, they would work as a group to get rid of any authority figure standing in their way. By this point in the school year, the class knew the system and how to

scare off teachers: scream racism and sexism and watch the teachers run.

After the second week, I questioned my decision to undertake this challenge. After the second week, I questioned my entire career choice.

At the beginning of February the class held a school-sponsored Valentine's dance. This event had been organized well before I entered the classroom, and I was told the dance could not be cancelled. I now was in charge of organizing and supervising a group of rowdy pre-teens. It was like Dirty Dancing. I spent the next two hours as a dance club bouncer. I broke up one fight, split apart several grinding dance partners, and removed inappropriate songs from the set-list.

By the end of the dance, well past 3:00 p.m., I was called down to the principal's office. "We need to contact the RCMP!" Allegedly several of the students in my class stole the dance money left unsupervised in the DJ's truck. Now I was the in the middle of a huge mess: probing police officers, angry parents, unremorseful students. This was less than a month into my first teaching position. And this was by no means an isolated or extraordinary event for the rest of my contract. In fact, I would get to know the school's RCMP liaison officer quite well over the remainder of the school year.

I got home at 9:00 p.m. that evening. I was in tears. It was a tough day and I was not comforted by the fact that, in less than twelve hours, I had to face that class again. I felt burned out. I didn't know if I could continue.

**Field Note: The Calling and the Burden**

I remember that moment of calling - I found direction. I enjoyed working with children. I wanted to work with children.

I remember that moment of burden - I questioned my 'calling' to be a teacher. I wanted to quit.

When I look back I'm always startled by the responsibility I had as a young adult. At those summer camps I acted as a parent for almost 20 kids, managed money, excursions, food. As a new teacher, I faced 30 kids every day. I marked, planned, and guided them all through academic and social issues.

How did I manage all that responsibility? Do I want to keep on coping with such pressure and accountability?

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

**call·ing - n:** a strong inner impulse toward a particular way of life or career<sup>1</sup>

“The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling, is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side.” – *James Arthur Baldwin*

**bur·den – n:** something oppressive or worrisome; a heavy load that you carry<sup>2</sup>

“It is not the burden, but the over-burden that kills the beast.” – *French Proverb*

### **a good day**

The children fled across the forest, and the teacher followed.

The sunlight was muted, eclipsed by the ominous clouds and lush woods overhead. Dark. Quiet. Secret.

A crack of branches sounded. Footsteps and muffled laughter echoed through the trees. The source was close. He began to run. A glimmer of red and blue dashed through the brush. His eyes reached out through the web of undergrowth. The teacher screamed.

“You’re dead!”

He was the human. He was the predator. The children were his prey.

That day was almost perfect. A game of Predator-Prey was an engaging and educational conclusion to the unit on ecosystems and the delicacies of the local and global food chain. And while the educational benefits and the call of the children’s laughter made his school day memorable, he felt like the exhausted prey.

He had arrived at school several hours before the morning bell to prepare the school’s forest area. Signs, cones, and other pertinent equipment had to be positioned and concealed; notices needed to be typed, approved and printed; first aid equipment had to be organized.

He stayed at school several hours after the afternoon bell to clean the forest area. Trash had to be removed. Equipment needed to be replaced. Evaluations had to be completed.

The day was almost perfect.

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<sup>1</sup> Calling (n.d.). In *Oxford English dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://oxforddictionaries.com>

<sup>2</sup> Burden (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster English dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>



## The Journey

I have been a teacher for eight years. The distinct echo of the call to teaching, alongside my positive memories of teaching, coax me back each September – a grateful parent, an engaging class, a caring school community. However, in each one of those years I have experienced a time, or an event, that has made me question my desire to continue teaching – an irate parent, a class out-of-control, a layoff notice. Early in my career, I realized that teaching is a job steeped in burdens. While I still hear the call, my passion is muted again and again by the barrage and accumulation of these burdens. As a consequence, I experience times when I feel teacher burnout.

I wrote *a good day*, as a creative non-fiction, to identify two divergent and discordant forces that affect teachers: the push and pull of the burden and the call of teaching. In the story, the teacher's day is almost perfect – teacher and students are learning, laughing, and playing. By the end of the day, the teacher probably felt the strong inner impulse toward teaching – he heard the calling. But, he was tired. The preparation and physical exertion was a load – he carried the burden. As a teacher myself, I imagine he carried this familiar burden quite naturally. This was a good day. Imagine a difficult day, or a string of days, when the burden is too heavy on the body, on the heart, on the mind.

Teachers live in this space between the calling and the burden. Every day teachers are bombarded with situations and experiences – some rewarding, some disparaging. As such, teachers are constantly being pulled in by the positive experiences – those that remind us of why we teach, and pushed out by the negative experiences – those that

remind us of our heavy burden. Teachers practice in this zone of tension between the calling and the burden of teaching. Day in and day out, teachers continue to perform their countless responsibilities within this zone. Unfortunately, teachers become trapped here, unable to stay and unable to leave. That is, the calling and passion for teaching prevents a departure from the field, while too often the burden provides an environment difficult to cope with. Herein lies the problem I explore in my thesis: what happens when the discouraging experiences and daily workload become too overwhelming and the teacher is pushed up against the burden, pushed up against a wall. Stress develops. Burnout follows. Teachers become intimate with the “ugly side” of teaching. The overburden “kills the beast.”

Stress is a typical byproduct inherent in any occupation. Nevertheless, stress resulting from burdens is not always a negative workplace phenomenon. Stress in the short-term can encourage and motivate workers. But what happens when the burden is too great and endures over time? When workplace burden increases, and stress accumulates over the long-term, physical and emotional problems can occur.

Workplace burnout – a condition whereby a person is unable to cope effectively with a recurrent surplus of burden and stress – is the eventual consequence of continuing stress. Research literature on burnout in the workplace reports that people who experience burnout are at risk of job dissatisfaction, mental instability, and depression. As well, The Maslach Burnout Inventory, an internationally used burnout indicator, establishes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment as further

symptoms of burnout. The consequence of burnout in any profession extends beyond the personal insofar as workers who experience burnout are more prone to inefficiency, absenteeism, and disability claims. As a result, the economic costs related to these consequences are difficult to calculate in many communities.

Teacher burnout, in particular, is a major problem. Educational research clearly demonstrates that teachers have one of the most stressful professions. Teacher burnout is on the rise. Every day teachers experience a multitude of burdens and stressors such as undefined workload, diversity of responsibilities, lack of time, negative media perception, classroom composition, under-funding, accountability, changing government initiatives and expectations, and so on. British Columbia teachers, particularly, have the highest reported levels of burnout in Canada, with many reporting longer work hours and loss of summer holidays to prepare for the classroom demands (e.g. preparing for a new subject area or grade level). Chapter 2 presents a general discussion of the literature on stress and burnout in the workplace, teacher burnout, and studies related to the larger contexts of teacher burnout in British Columbia.

While the larger social, political, and cultural contexts of school community impact the learning and teaching environment, this study explores individual stories that focus on teachers' lived experiences of burnout. Thus, the purposes of this study are: to identify and describe the phenomenon of teacher burnout through their stories, and to document ways teachers avoid and cope with stress and burnout. The following research questions guide the study:

- What are teacher stories that identify instances of stress that lead to burnout?
- What are teachers' personal activities and strategies that help them cope with the stress they deal with as teachers?

In the thesis I examine teacher stories under the methodological lenses of narrative inquiry (specifically teacher narrative) and autoethnography. Firstly, I use narrative inquiry because it is retrospective; it shapes and orders lived experiences and events to facilitate meaning. Through story, a particular phenomenon and/or event is described by the ones who live the experience. Narrative inquiry is actively creative with an emphasis on the narrator's voice. Given my research questions, I use narrative inquiry to elicit teachers' voices and stories in order to create meaning out of their lived experiences around burnout and coping with stress.

Teacher narrative, in particular, offers a glimpse into the knowledge landscapes of teaching as experienced by teachers. In this thesis, the stories told by the teacher storytellers are "secret" stories often told in "secret" places. That is, these kinds of stories are not usually voiced to people outside of the teaching profession – parents, administrators, the media. As opposed to "cover" stories, whereby teachers portray themselves as expert people, "secret" stories are usually told in a private location, in the confidentiality of other teachers who can understand and empathize with the experiences. The importance of telling these stories is that outsiders get a glimpse into the daily life of teachers. As well, teachers can use their stories to inquire about and explore professional

identity, to make changes in their own practice, and elicit transformation in the teaching field.

Secondly, I use autoethnography because I am actively aware of my dual role as researcher and teacher in this study. As a teacher, I listened to the stories almost daily in the staffroom. I was keenly aware of the fact that I had similar stories of stress and burnout. Autoethnography, as a second methodology, permits my own personal voice and stories to enter into the study and mirror the stories offered by the focus group. Also, autoethnography enables me to examine the cultural aspects of burnout by considering the social contexts in which it occurs. Similar to narrative inquiry, autoethnography allows a reflective practice and inquiry into my own professional identity. In Chapter 3, I discuss narrative inquiry generally, teacher narrative, and autoethnography, as well as the context of the study (e.g. recruitment, participants/storytellers, procedures, etc.).

To elicit the “secret” stories of teacher stress and burnout, and in turn establish a setting for my own stories to be told, I interviewed six teachers in a focus group. Since they knew each other as fellow students in a Master’s program, a feeling of trust, empathy, confidentiality, and safety had already been established. As a result, emotional and raw stories around stress and burnout emerged during the two-hour focus group session/discussion. Some laughed. Some cried. In Chapter 5, I use these “secret” stories as data to dig deeper into the phenomenon of teacher burnout. I develop a conceptual framework that expands on four interrelated themes found throughout the “secret” stories.

This thesis offers a layering of three distinct voices: the teacher, the academic, and the reflexive self. In Chapter 4, we hear the voice of the teacher. I include twelve “secret” stories in narrative form, each reflecting on an instance of workplace stress. The format of each page is single spaced with large margins to look and read differently than the Literature, Methodology, and Conclusion chapters. Half of these narratives are the voices of the six focus group participants – the storytellers. Their stories were recorded, transcribed, and edited for grammar and flow. The other six stories are my voice as a teacher. Each mirrors a story told by a member of the focus group. My teacher voice is also in the Prologue and Epilogue. Each of these sections contains two stories that reflect on the zone of tension in which teachers reside – between the calling and the burden.

With an academic voice, I bring in the expertise of scholars in a literature review for both the topic of burnout and narrative methodology in order to locate my study within a larger context on stress and burnout generally, and on teacher burnout specifically. I do not want the teacher stories to appear as inconsequential or insignificant. For me, these literature reviews offer a background and legitimacy to the phenomenon.

Finally, the voice of my reflexive self is conscious and introspective as both teacher and researcher selves. These boxed “field notes” are located in various places throughout the thesis. The field notes represent questions I asked myself throughout this research process. These are not questions I necessarily answered, but ones that provoked my thinking between the literature and the stories.

**Field Note: Between the Teacher and the Researcher**

I start off this journey trying to be a researcher, toting my clipboard of "academic" objectives. I wander around for a long time until it hits me: my role as a teacher just can't be separated from what I am investigating. I feel like I'm in this in-between place. I'm a teacher with stories from the edge. I'm part of the teaching culture. I'm a graduate student (isn't that an oxymoron?) trying to find the right questions. I'm part of an academic community. When am I a teacher? When am I a researcher?

Many voices are clamoring to enter this thesis - the researcher, the reflexive-self, the teacher(s). How do I represent them all?

Each voice unique. Each voice represented. My voice represented.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE**

Burnout is a phenomenon that is frequently cited in research, particularly in psychology, business, and education. However, many researchers actually avoid defining the term explicitly (Schwab, 1983). Consequently, I did not find a single agreed-on definition. In fact, as Christina Maslach (1981) points out, most experts cannot even agree on how to spell it: “burn-out? Burn-out? Burnout?” What most researchers do agree is that burnout is related to stress. The distinction between stress and burnout is important to understand because of their inter-relatedness. Generally, stressors (e.g. role conflict, ambiguity, and over-stimulation) cause stress in the short term, while in the long term these stressors can have an accumulating effect, which can lead to burnout.

### **Work Stress**

Stress is now a recognized feature of contemporary life (Harden, 1999). However, stress is not burnout. In many professional fields, especially those in the public service area, stress is an inevitable component of the job. But stress is not always a negative workplace phenomenon. Stress, at least in the short-term, can be a stimulating part of a profession, such as stress related to a deadline. Unfortunately, stress that accumulates and increases over the long-term can lead to physical and emotional problems.

Herbert Freudenberger (1974) was the first to describe and define the concept of work-related stress. In particular, Freudenberger examined the mental and physical exhaustion caused by excessive work hours, heavy workloads, and excessive work intensity in workers in the public relations sector. Hiebert (1988) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984)



later defined work stress as the reactions of persons who feel external demands beyond their endurance, which results in physiological, psychological, and behavioral changes. Within the teaching profession in particular, Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) define stress as:

a response to a negative effect, usually accompanied by potentially harmful psychological changes, resulting from the aspects of the [teacher's] job and mediated by the perception that job demands are a threat and by coping mechanisms activated to reduce the threat. (as cited in Sharp & Foreman, 1985, p. 370)

In the short-term, Cunningham (1983) lists symptoms of work stress including fatigue, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression. Many of these symptoms are also noted in cases of burnout.

### **Work-Related Burnout**

In much of the research, burnout is seen as the result of long-term stress which has not been addressed over time. Chronic stress causes debilitating effects on a personal and professional level, and if left unattended can lead to burnout (Faber, 1991). Edelwich and Brodsk (1980) call burnout a syndrome “composed of a person’s inability to cope effectively with a continual bombardment of stressors, a syndrome whose symptoms are a continuing loss of idealism, energy, and purpose” (p. 14). Expanding on this definition, Pines, Aronson, and Kafrey (1981) characterize burnout as “a state of mind resulting from prolonged exposure to intense emotional stress and involving three major components: physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion” (as cited in Harden, 1999, p.

245). Pines and Aronson (1988) continue to build on the definition by explaining burnout as a long-term emotional state resulting in physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion.

Maslach (1978) was the first researcher to gather data on burnout, and explained the phenomenon as “emotional exhaustion resulting from the stress of interpersonal contact” (p. 56). Taking the research beyond definition, Maslach derived the most commonly used scale to measure burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI allows the phenomenon of burnout to be distinguished from similar and related feelings, such as dissatisfaction, tension, pressure, depression, and stress. It establishes three factors or aspects of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to a feeling of being emotionally drained, with a loss of concern, trust, and spirit. After prolonged and intensive connections with work stressors, professionals find their emotional energies are depleted (Schwab, 1983).

Although the research indicates that emotional exhaustion is the primary characteristic of burnout, it is not the only determinant factor, and depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment must also be considered. Depersonalization is described as a negative, uncaring, or marked detached response to others. An example is a lack of consideration for one’s colleagues and clients. Reduced personal accomplishment is a reduction in feelings of competence and successful achievement in one’s work. In other words, when workers perceive themselves as no longer making a meaningful contribution in their work, they evaluate themselves negatively (Schwab, 1983).

Not every professional experiences these potentially devastating aspects of stress. As such, several etiological models have been established to address the question of how, and under what circumstances, work stress may lead to burnout. In a recent study on coping in the workplace for probation officers, Dzedzora (2010) cites two current theoretical models to make clear the process of burnout. The Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004) contends that all work environments include job demands and job resources. However, certain job demands and the lack of certain job resources, often outside of the control of the employee, can facilitate symptoms of stress and burnout. The Demand-Control Model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990), also referred to as the Job-Strain Model, parallels the Job-Demands-Resource Model with the suggestion that lack of control over job demands and job resources results in job stress. This model extends to include job insecurity and lack of social support from supervisors and coworkers as further contributors to job stress and potential depression. The Demand-Control Model echoes the notion that buffering variables, such as social support, constructive feed-back, autonomy, resources, and role consistency, can decrease possible job stress.

### **Workplace Stress and Burnout: Consequences**

Much of the stress in our lives is from the workplace. Burnout is noted in many professions. Research indicates that professionals working with people who are in need, or are experiencing difficulties, are more susceptible to stress and burnout. Studies show that people experiencing burnout are more likely to leave their jobs, use sick days,

increase their use of drugs and alcohol, have marital and family problems, and depression (Jackson & Maslach, 1980).

Several studies (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Kessler & Frank, 1997) have used the Demand-Control Model to study the connection between work stress and depression. In these studies, participants who identified high stress in decision authority, job insecurity, and lack of social support from coworkers and supervisors were more likely to experience depression. In the United States, according to The National Health Interview Survey Disability Supplement (Zwerling et al., 2002), 2.9 million respondents reported having major depression, with almost half relating depression to the workplace. The result is an impaired ability to work, reduced productivity on the job, disability, and absenteeism. The World Health Organization predicts that over the next 20 years, depression will be the second largest health burden on earth, second only to cardiovascular disease.

### **Economic Costs Related to Workplace Burnout and Depression**

With costs between four and twelve percent of payroll, depression is Canada's fastest growing disability. The mental health effects of depression, anxiety, and stress are the leading causes of short-term and long-term disability (Hreceniuk, 2008). In Canada, according to the Canadian National Population Health Survey (NPHS, 1996-1997), 4.2% of the Canadian population experienced a major depressive episode in 1995. In a 2000 study, 1.4 million Canadian workers (10% in total) suffered from depression (Wilson, Joffe, Wilkerton, & Bastable, 2000). According to Health Canada (2008), 48% of long-

term disability claims in the workplace have depression as a component, with the cost of corporate health in Canada estimated at \$33 billion per year.

A report by Wilson, Joffe, Wilkerton, and Bastable (2000) stated that:

- Depression costs the United States and Canada \$60 billion US per year;
- The incidence of depression is growing and is affecting more young workers;
- Stress is increasing and change is continuing to intensify;
- Over the past decade, labor productivity and hours worked by employees have collapsed into a terrific imbalance. Canadians are working longer and harder, but not more productively. (as cited by Naylor, 2001, p. 13)

Bill Wilkerson, chairman of the Global and Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, argues that “the absenteeism, disability claims, and distress among Canada’s nurses, doctors, teachers, and bureaucrats have reached such crisis proportions that it’s time for a major fact-finding study into what is ‘sabotaging taxpayers’ investment into these critical services” (*Victoria Times Colonist*, 16 June, 2008).

One Canadian report (Higgins, Duxbury, and Lyons, 2007) found that 60% of Canadian workers suffered from high levels of stress when trying to balance work and family life. The report also states that the resulting absenteeism cost Canada \$2.8 billion each year in medical costs and missed work productivity. Another report (Lam, 2004) estimates the total cost to be higher at around \$5.4 billion each year. In a 2008 report (Contant, 2008), data showed that in Canada, 72% of long-term and 82% of short-term disability claims are linked to mental health issues, related to stress and burnout.

## **Teacher Stressors**

In an article that reviews teacher burnout, Sue Howard and Bruce Johnson list twenty-four teacher stressors, from poor student-teacher relationships to lack of control and decision making power. In my review of the literature of teacher stressors, six key areas stand out: workload; diversity of the job; lack of time; negative media perception; classroom composition; and compassion fatigue.

### **Workload**

In an article by Drago et al. (1999), the authors contend that teachers' work intensification mirrors a societal trend. In many professions, including teaching, workers feel a need to retain a high commitment to work in order to survive the competitive work place. In Canada, issues around workload have been a concern for many teachers and teachers' unions. For some teachers, the demands of teaching can be overwhelming. The workload has no well-defined limits; it is essentially open-ended with much added but nothing taken away. As Naylor (2001) argues, "there exists a strong yet subtle pressure on teachers to add to their workload regardless of what the existing workload might be" (p. 13). And, while contracts with school boards appear to define expectations regarding teacher workload, contract terms represent minimum requirements. What about after-school sports programs? Planning committees? Staff meetings? To respond to the needs of every student, teachers often do far more than is necessary, and some try to do more than they can physically or psychologically manage.

## **Diversity of the Job**

Teachers have many diverse occupational requirements. In a sense, teaching is a multi-track job, wherein teachers are required to do several tasks, often all at once. The need to fill many different roles is a cause for alarm. Gallen, Karlenzig, and Tamney (1995) point out:

Counselor, social worker, nurse, chauffeur, fund-raiser, mediator, public relations officer, entertainer... the list of roles that teachers are called upon to perform on behalf of their students, schools, and communities, is lengthy and diverse. As all roles are important and teachers are constantly pressed for time, they must often make difficult choices about their priorities. For some teachers, these decisions result in an ongoing sense of role conflict. (as cited in Naylor, 2001, p. 5).

## **Time**

Workload, and its relation with time, appears to be a major stressor for educators. According to research, a teacher's overall work day is close to double the actual hours in a typical school day (Malcolmson, 1999). Under the pressures of work demands, teachers are spending a high number of hours planning and preparing during lunch hours, after school, and on weekends and holidays. The number and complexity of teacher tasks are wide and diverse. In addition to core/required professional activities, such as contact teaching, preparation, marking, assessment, and reporting, teachers are bombarded with meetings, paperwork, testing, materials purchasing, even cleaning of classrooms and school facilities. Unfortunately, statistics show a worsening trend. According to Naylor (2001), teacher workload increased over the ten year period from 1982-1992. Moreover,

two-thirds (65.4%) of teachers in British Columbia, who have taught five or more years, report that their workload increased from five years earlier (Schaefer, 2003).

Many reports indicate that certain times of the school year can induce above normal amounts of stress. The time around report cards and parent-teacher interviews are particularly demanding for educators. Part of the problem is the constant change in evaluation procedures and requirements. The other part of the issue is the time, outside of the class hours, to complete evaluations and report cards.

### **Media Perception**

Media is another major stressor for teachers. Often, media reports about educators are negative and/or unsympathetic. Media view the profession from the outside and frequently fault teachers for the perceived shortcomings in the educational system. As well, much of the media imply that teachers “have it easy” and that they should be doing more. Some examples include:

B.C. teachers... enjoy holidays and other benefits most B.C. workers can only dream about. (*The Province*, editorial, September 10, 2001)

Summers off. Christmas season off. Spring break off. Professional development days. This comes close to three months holiday during the course of a year, not including weekends. (Dean Bassett, *The Daily Townsman*, October 11, 2001)

No matter how you cut it, a full year’s pay for nine months work is a sweet deal. (Shelly Fralic, *The Vancouver Sun*, November 19, 2001)



The fact remains, much of the media perception around teachers is utterly false.

According to British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) statistics, while teachers have two months off during the summer, most teachers rarely use all of this time for conventional holidays. The average teacher in British Columbia only uses about 58% of her or his summer break as holidays (Naylor, 2001). More than one in five teachers do other paid work during the summer to offset the unpaid summer break and low professional salaries. As well, nearly three-quarters of teachers spend a portion of their summer planning, preparing, and learning new pedagogy and curriculum for the upcoming school year, which often includes a new grade level. Again this points to the inadequate preparation time during the school year.

Other media reports tend to focus on those teachers who have abused their profession and/or broken the law. While such reports are important for the community, the media often fail to present stories that demonstrate the teaching profession in a positive light.

### **Classroom Composition**

Another stressor inherent to the teaching profession is the diverse, complex, and changing nature of the classroom composition. A teacher must meet the educational needs of students from families with low-economic status, students with attention disorders, students with behavioral issues, gifted students, English-as-a-second-language students, apathetic students, and so on. To meet this diverse composition, teachers must organize a range of pedagogical, organizational, and managerial approaches. Also, teachers will often need to adapt or modify materials in order to facilitate learning for those students

with special needs (e.g. autism). Often this task of adapting and modifying requires special training and practice, or a support specialist. Unfortunately, funds, resources and time for training and implementation are not always available, and the workload falls on the shoulder of the classroom teacher, thereby increasing stress levels and the potential for burnout.

### **Compassion Fatigue**

Compassion fatigue (also known as Secondary Traumatic Stress) is another form of stress that impacts workers in the health, education and social services professions. First diagnosed in nurses in the 1950s, Hamilton (2008) describes compassion fatigue as “the most recent term to describe the emotional reaction of a helper to another person’s trauma” (p. 11). Teachers care about and have a constant empathetic engagement with their students, many of which have distressing family situations/histories. Often, teachers begin to feel the pain and suffering of the students for whom they care. Compassion fatigue can then be viewed as the emotional mirroring of those who are suffering to those who are providing the care. The result of this cost of caring is “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion or dissatisfaction with one’s work situation” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 12). That is, sufferers can exhibit symptoms including hopelessness, a decrease in job satisfaction and productivity, elevated levels of anxiety, the inability to focus, self-doubt, and an overall negative attitude.

## **Stress and Burnout: Teacher Consequences**

Educational literature is widespread regarding the growing prevalence of teacher stress and burnout (Travers & Cooper, 1996; Kyriacou, 2000; Naylor, 2001). In fact, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) argue that teachers represent the largest homogeneous occupational group investigated in burnout research, comprising 22% of all samples. These studies on stress and burnout in the workplace show that teachers have a high risk for burnout (Dunham & Varma, 1998; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978). Of particular concern are the consequences to both the affected teacher and the learning environment itself.

In the educational system, studies have shown that the effects of teacher stress and burnout have a severe negative consequence on student outcomes. The effects of over-stressed and burned-out teachers include declining job satisfaction, and behavior that is less tolerant, less caring, less patient, and a reduced ability to meet students' needs (Blase, 1986; Galbo, 1983). In addition, research suggests a direct correlation between student classroom stress and anxiety, and teacher stress and anxiety (Sinclair & Ryan, 1987). In effect, the teacher's anxiety exhibited in the classroom may provoke anxiety in students. This stress correlation is circular in that it increases back and forth between the teacher and the student.

Burnout is also connected to the significant incidences of psychological disorders leading to increased absenteeism and high levels of stress-related disability claims. As a result, schools are becoming unhealthy places for teachers and students. Kevin Reed, an Ontario teacher, argues the following:

Workload should not consume people. Teachers who are exhausted, frazzled and demoralized by their work are not effective or creative in the classroom. And exhaustion further undermines the social bonds in schools. When teachers do not have the energy to interact effectively with each other, with administrators and with students, serious problems emerge. And the workload issue will not go away soon.... If the increased workload remains, I predict that schools will progressively become less healthy places. And everyone will be affected – teachers, support staff, students and parents. That cannot be good news. (as cited by Naylor, 2001, p. 2)

Internationally, stress and burnout appear to be contributing reasons that teachers are leaving the profession (Naylor, 2001). In addition, issues related to teacher recruitment are also linked to teacher stress and burnout.

International studies show that teachers' work intensification mirrors societal trends toward overwork (Naylor, 2001). As a result, teacher stress and burnout have been a focus of educational concern and research for decades. In recent years, educational systems in many countries have come under extensive scrutiny and criticism from the public, media, and government. At the same time, the rewards of teaching are often precluded by the difficulties inherent in the profession. Faced with diverse and overcrowded classrooms, inflexible and continually changing curriculum, unsupportive parents, apathetic students and low salaries, teachers are experiencing an alarming degree of frustration, stress, and burnout.

## **Stress and Burnout: Teachers in British Columbia**

British Columbia's teachers report the highest levels of stress nationwide (King & Peart, 1992). Data confirm that B.C. teachers work the longest hours, nearly two hours above the already high national average (Naylor, 2001). In a 2001 BCTF report, many respondents reported working over 60 hours each week. As well, many of these overworked teachers spent over 20 hours a week working on unpaid extra-curricular activities, often sacrificing lunch, evening, and weekend hours. Naylor (2001) argues the following:

Some teachers' commitment to teaching appears so strong that they are sacrificing their physical and mental health, and in some cases their relationships, to maintain programs and classes, often working more than 60 hours each week... this represents a severe and unsustainable imbalance in many teachers' lives... some teachers view early retirement as the only likely escape from a heavy workload.

(p. 11)

According to the 2001 BCTF report, B.C. educators believe that their professional workload has increased. Specifically, B.C. teachers contend that major new non-teaching additions to the core activities of a teacher have been instituted over recent years. Teachers are expected to do far more than teach, and the expectations appear to have no definable limit. Teachers feel a growing workload, with many tasks added while nothing is taken away to compensate.

Curriculum change is another work-related complication and stressor. Many teachers stated that B.C. student outcomes and expectations have changed repeatedly over recent years. As one teacher explains:

There have been curriculum changes in mathematics every year for the past 5 years and it's still going on. Resources to run the new curriculum are at least 2 years behind, and training for the new technology required by changes has been minimal and offered only sporadically, not yearly to allow real understanding and improvement. (as cited in Naylor, 2001, p. 12-13)

Resources, even the most basic resources (e.g. textbooks and lab equipment), are not adequately supplied to meet the educational outcomes of the students. Many respondents of the BCTF report indicated that they purchased their own supplies for their classrooms because the Education Ministry and local school districts were not providing adequate resources to competently teach required student outcomes. Other teachers indicated that they were forced to find suitable intra-district and internet resources. In doing so, teacher workload increases as they struggle to find other appropriate materials and resources.

Furthermore, the majority of BCTF report respondents found their work-related stress levels were not within acceptable limits. A large group of respondents indicated that their current workload and stress levels were negatively impacting their desire and motivation to remain a teacher. Many teachers reported negative effects on their own family life. As a result, many were considering quitting the teaching profession. Often, those continuing to teach reported illness with stress as a believed direct cause. One B.C. teacher stated:

I work on average 60-70 hours a week in order to keep organized and up to date. When I am not organized and up to date, then I feel everything is not operating functionally. Therefore I don't have time to get sick or 'smell the roses' so to speak, because there is just too much work to do. Yet this trap of working so much is what gets me sick and all stressed out – it's a vicious trap. Yet I continue teaching, even when I'm sick, because I feel responsible for providing a strong program and because I love working with students. (as cited in Naylor, 2001, p. 18)

In a study by Tataryn, Rowan, Hanson, and Goguen (1998), the authors reported that the largest single category of disability lasting more than twenty days was psychological disorders, at 36% of the total disability cases. The authors suggest that this was linked to stressful work environments.

In Naylor's research (2001), a number of teachers indicated that they were considering working part-time as a coping mechanism for an increased workload and high stress. One British Columbia teacher says, "I was close to needing time off. Instead I cut back my time to 0.6 from 0.89. I feel this is unfair because it compromises my income" (as cited in Naylor, 2001, p. 9). In effect, these teachers were subsidizing the education system by working full-time for part-time pay. Other teachers, both beginning and veteran, opted for early retirement as the only likely escape from a heavy workload and potential burnout.

## **Teachers Coping with Stress**

According to Kyriacou (2001), teachers attempt to cope with stress in two ways: direct action and palliative techniques. Direct action refers to strategies that teachers can perform to eliminate the source(s) of stress. To do so, the teacher must have a clear idea of the source of tension. Once the source is identified, a teacher must then carry out some form of action that will reduce or remove the cause of the stress. For example, if a report card deadline is a stressor, a direct action to reduce the problem is to seek a time extension from the administration.

Palliative techniques do not deal with the source of stress itself but instead attempts to reduce the impact of the stressor(s). In effect, palliative actions are emotion-control techniques. Such techniques are often physical in nature. For example, yoga and relaxation training are physical actions aimed at reducing muscle tension and emotional anxiety. Other palliative techniques may be mental and involve teachers modifying how they appraise a stressful situation. Nevertheless, some palliative actions can be unreliable, and in the long-term, dysfunctional. For example, smoking and drinking are often avoidance behaviors that are done to ease the feelings of (di)stress even though such actions do not deal directly with the source.

According to Kyriacou (2000), direct actions are healthier coping strategies, because “if they are successful they actually remove the source of stress. Palliative techniques, although very often effective, will also involve a degree of mental energy to sustain effectively over a long period” (p. 81). When individual direct and palliative coping



actions fail, and the stress persists, burnout can ensue and consequences discussed above, such as diminished job satisfaction, depression and absenteeism, can occur. In another study by Kyriacou (2001) he lists the most frequent coping actions used by teachers that include the following range of direct and palliative actions:

- Try to keep problems in perspective;
- Avoid confrontations;
- Try to relax at work;
- Take action to deal with the problems;
- Keep feelings under control;
- Devote more time to particular tasks;
- Discuss problems and express feelings to others;
- Have a healthy home life;
- Plan ahead and prioritize;
- Recognize one's own limitations.

A number of studies draw attention to the importance of working in a school where an environment of support is present (Sheffield, Dobbie, & Carroll, 1994; Punch & Tuetteman, 1996). In this type of school atmosphere, teachers share concerns with each other, which can lead to productive guidance or a direct action by colleagues to resolve a source of stress. Also, sharing problems in the staffroom, or engaging in social activity with colleagues, can often help reduce the feelings of stress, and help increase the effectiveness of individual coping strategies. According to Kyriacou (2001, p. 31-32), characteristics of a healthy school include:

- Good communication between staff;
- A strong sense of collegiality;
- Management decisions based on consultation;
- Consensus established on key values and standards;
- Whole school policies in place;
- Role and expectations clearly defined;
- Teachers receive positive feedback and praise;

- Good level of resources and facilities to support teachers;
- Support available to help solve problems;
- Policies and procedures are easy to follow;
- Red tape and paperwork is minimized;
- Additional duties are matched to teachers' skills;
- Building environment is pleasant to work in;
- Senior management makes good use of forward planning;
- Induction and career development advice are given.

Brown and Uehara (1999) discuss the importance of intervention programs aimed at equipping teachers with effective strategies for dealing with workplace stress. Their research talks about three coping strategies: physiological coping, situational coping, and cognitive coping. First, a successful intervention program begins with a participant's clear knowledge and awareness of a particular stress. Once the cause of stress has been recognized and identified, preventative strategies can be implemented. Physiological coping strategies emphasize the importance of being physical. Examples of physiological coping strategies include (Brown & Uehara, 1999, p. 14):

- Biofeedback – electronic measurement of mind-body functions (muscle tension, intestinal activity, blood flow, breathing, heartbeat) and techniques to control those functions;
- Muscle relaxation – self-regulated, progressive body relaxation that puts the individual in an extremely restful state;
- Focused meditation – there are many meditation techniques; the most current and popular form involves focusing on a “mantra” (single word, number, or phrase) for about 15 to 20 minutes;
- Breathing techniques – learning how to breathe for relaxation purposes;
- Aerobic activity – any type of activity that raises the level of one's pulse rate (e.g. swimming or jogging).

Situational coping strategies revolve around an individual's ability to change their reaction to specific stressful situations or alter their work environment. In making this

type of environmental adjustment, participants must learn to be assertive and enlist the cooperation of others. This may involve: meetings with colleagues or administrators; discussing and clarifying specific school-related stressors; developing goals and specific plans to reduce the stressors; providing feedback to other staff; encouraging and assisting staff and administration in implementing changes to alleviate or modify structures, processes, and behaviors causing stress.

Cognitive coping strategies emphasize the importance of appraising and re-appraising how one thinks about stressful or stress-producing situations. To do so, a teacher focuses on several mental techniques (Brown & Uehara, 1999, p. 16):

- Replacing self-defeating, self-limiting beliefs with more constructive, realistic, and empowering ones; learning how to recognize self-doubt in order to coach oneself into changing these thoughts;
- Identifying barriers: examining personal values, both work- and non-work-related, and setting goals. Through this technique, roadblocks are identified. With training in other techniques such as time management, barriers can be overcome;
- Improving the management and goal setting/prioritization skills: keeping track of how one spends time and adjusting behavior to match identified goals. Activities such as To Do lists, weekly routines, and six month planning calendars, help individuals focus energy and combat procrastination;
- Using problem-solving techniques; encouraging individuals to analyze, understand, and deal with problem situations rather than avoiding them, blaming others, or feeling helpless;
- Handling emotions: looking closely at how emotions such as frustrations, anxiety, and fear contribute to ineffective coping strategies; and allowing individuals to reassess their feelings and “re-write” effective responses;
- Dealing with life changes: developing counseling skills among individuals in order to help colleagues deal with stressful events. This includes developing communications skills such as listening and empathy; actively listening as well as communicating one’s thoughts effectively; and clarifying one’s personal feelings.

## **Conclusion**

Burnout in the workplace has been studied for over 30 years. Current research clearly demonstrates that the level of stress in many professions, especially those involved with the care of people, is on the rise. However, the reasons for this steep incline are not clear. From reading the literature on stress and burnout, I speculate that workers are doing more with less time, resources, and control. The fact that the literature reports a preponderance of work-related stress and burnout among teachers is relevant to this study. Furthermore, the stress levels among teachers across Canada are the highest in British Columbia. Based on specific studies related to British Columbia teachers, coupled with my own experiences and conversations with colleagues, I argue that this consequence relates to the lack of preventative resources (e.g., professional development, mentorship programs, counseling), the lack of professional autonomy due to multiple issues of accountability, and the constant changes in the curriculum.

Studies regarding coping typically include long lists of strategies, often obtained by surveys and questionnaires. These lists correspond to long lists of stressors found in the stress-burnout literature. In the meantime, coping strategies are not keeping up with the rising phenomenon of work-related stress. In my study, I examine the phenomenon of burnout by going deeper inside the problem through narrative inquiry. Rather than analyzing data from surveys and questionnaires, and creating more lists, I analyze the themes evident within the “secret” stories of teachers and their experiences with stress and burnout.

**Field Note: What if?**

What if I knew about the burnout data before I became a teacher? Would the calling have resonated as loud?

The numbers speak volumes. Stress is a reality in our culture. Burnout is a problem among teachers. Who should be privy to this information? Why aren't pre-service teachers informed?

I wish I knew the statistics before my pursuit of the calling. I think an understanding, even as numbers, of the "ugly side" is important. What if I knew about the burnout data before becoming a teacher? I wonder.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In my study, the combination of narrative inquiry and autoethnography allows me to engage with teachers' stories, including my own, that identify and describe lived experiences of stress and burnout in teaching. The telling and sharing of these stories within the focus group is an act of inquiry into personal, as well as cultural, aspects of being and acting between the call and the burden of teaching, and when and how the burden becomes heavy.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Susan Chase (2005) describes narrative inquiry as a flourishing methodology in the social sciences. According to educational researchers Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is an understanding of “narrative as both phenomena under study and method of study” (p. 3). That is, as inquiry, a narrative is about a particular phenomenon, experience, and/or event; at the same time, it is a way to describe (or narrate) the particulars of that phenomenon, experience, and/or event described by the one who lives it. For a narrative researcher, the inquiry revolves around the voice of the narrator (or interviewee) and how to interpret and represent that voice in the study.

A narrative can be oral or written and is usually obtained by the researcher during fieldwork, interviews, or conversations. A narrative itself can be a short topical story about a particular event. As well, a narrative can extend to include a story about a

significant portion of an individual's life or, in fact, span the entire life of the individual participant. Ultimately, as Riessman (2002) contends, the researcher uses a personal narrative to tell, "a compelling topical narration" (as cited in Chase, 2005, p. 652).

Narrative is retrospective because it shapes and orders lived experiences and events to facilitate meaning. As Chase (2005) argues, "narrative is a way of understanding one's own and other's actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (p. 656). Chase further makes the distinction between narrative and other forms of discourse, such as chronology, editorial, and scientific discourse. While chronology reports a happening over time, a narrative includes the narrator's expressions of emotion, thought, and interpretation. While editorials also express a point of view, a narrative features the narrator as the protagonist who explains an understanding of actions and events. Although scientific discourse also explains an understanding of actions and events, narrative discourse promotes the distinctiveness of each action and event, rather than their common properties.

Narrative is actively creative with an emphasis on the narrator's voice. By connecting *what* the narrator communicates, *how* it is communicated and *where* the subject is positioned, the voice is made particular. As Chase (2005) argues, when narrative researchers view narrative as actively creative, and the narrator's voice as particular, they "move away from questions about the factual nature of the narrator's statements... [and] instead they highlight the versions of self, reality, and experience the storyteller produces

through the telling” (p. 657). This is not to say that narrators are not accountable for the credibility and believability of their stories. Narrative researchers see the trustworthiness of the narrative as the responsibility of the storyteller.

Narratives are often described as socially situated, interactive performances (Chase, 2005). That is, narratives are told in a particular setting, for a particular audience, for a particular purpose. This point matters since a narrator’s story may fluctuate, depending on the setting, audience, and/or purpose. For example, narratives gathered by an interviewer in a quiet, relaxed focus group surrounded by colleagues will, in all probability, vary from the “same” story told to a television reporter to be aired to a large public audience. Moreover, the “same” story may change when expressed to the same interviewer or reporter in a different place and/or time. Chase (2005) explains:

Here researchers emphasize that the narrator’s story is flexible, variable, and shaped in part by the interaction with the audience. In other words, a narrative is a joint production of narrator and listener, whether the narrative arises in naturally occurring talk, an interview, or a fieldwork setting. (p. 657)

In narrative inquiry, researchers themselves act as narrators by using the first person when submitting their work, and emphasizing their own narrative positions as they develop interpretations about the narratives they study. Chase (2005) remarks:

As narrators, then, researchers develop meaning out of, and some sense of order in, the material they study; they develop their own voice(s) as they construct others’ voices and realities; they narrate “results” in ways that are both enabled and constrained by the social resources and circumstances embedded in their disciplines, cultures, and historical moments; and they write or perform their work for particular audiences. (p. 657)



In developing this meaning and sense of order, narrative researchers attend to similarities and differences, as well as patterns in the stories, subjectivities, and realities, which narrators tell within particular times and places. In addition, some narrative inquiry highlights professional identity, studying specific narratives that are created in occupational settings: where we situate ourselves in relation to those we work with, ways we practice collaboration, and ways we value and confirm each other. For example, narrative inquiry has a history in Education, particularly in studies of educational settings. Nel Noddings argues, “too little attention is presently given to matters of community and collegiality and that such research should be constructed as research for teaching” (as cited in Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 510).

### **Teacher Narrative**

In “The Stories Teachers Tell and What They Tell Us,” Lorin W. Anderson (1997) argues that the knowledge landscapes of teaching are best understood within the narratives, the stories teachers live and tell. Based on Clandinin and Connelly’s work, Anderson identifies “sacred” stories as dominant stories in teacher education that are passed on from generation to generation. These stories are the taken-for-granted stories about teaching. “Competing” or “conflicting” stories are about the daily work of teachers, which are at odds with the sacred stories. Conflicting stories engender discussion and dialogue, generally about the uncertainty and distress around teaching. “Cover” stories enable teachers to portray themselves as characters in their stories who are confident and expert people. In addition, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) speak of “secret” stories as stories of practice. The authors contend:

These lived stories are essentially secret ones. Furthermore, when these secret lived stories are told, they are, for the most part, told to other teachers in secret places. When teachers move out of their classrooms into the out-of-classroom place on the landscape, they often live and tell cover stories, stories in which they portray themselves as experts, certain characters whose teacher stories fit within the acceptable range of story of school being lived in the school. (p. 25)

The sharing of stories among teachers permits negotiated meanings of ideas and practices, enabling teachers to engage in dialogues, and bridge gaps between theory and practice, which may lead to educational change. Stories are important because they carry the “tone, the language, the quality, the feelings, that are conveyed by the way a teacher speaks or writes” (Butt, Raymond, McCue , & Yamagishi, 1992 as cited in Anderson, 1997, p. 133). Stories can identify discomfort, confusion and frustration experienced by a teacher, which can be shared with others. Therefore, “the stories themselves are a means to an end; the end is a conceptual framework that can be used to help us understand and explain teachers’ stories in the future” (Anderson, 1997, p. 134). Anderson contends that stories are first and foremost for the teller, whereby the storyteller learns through the act of storytelling (p. 135). Secondly, stories are educative for listeners who are members of that community, sharing a common conceptual framework and language.

In “The Teacher Writer: Narrative Theory, Storytelling and Research” Trevor Hay and Julie White (2005) develop an approach for linking elements of narrative theory with storytelling and research. The authors argue that narrative is “a contemporary tool at the

disposal of teachers for the exploration of professional identity” (p. 1). Teacher stories are a form of discourse that conveys personal and professional knowledge and experience. When shared, these stories can be a means of “breaking through an apparent wall of isolation and self-doubt into a space of shared professional identity” (Hay & White, 2005, p. 1). Their research has involved beginning teacher stories as an entry point to exploring professional identity, and a means of entry into that discourse. In further work, Moss and Hay (2004) have made a link between the narrative and the beginning teachers emerging role as a researcher and activist. Similarly, Hay and White (2004), identify patterns in the stories of beginning teachers, which were commonly told as “disaster stories” or “war stories” whereby their characters were either heroes or the victims:

The common ‘tale-types’ in the international literature about beginning teachers identifies a familiar ‘novice and mentor’ binary obscuring issues of identity, knowledge, and power. In this discourse, teachers are dichotomized as ‘experienced’ or ‘inexperienced’, ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’, ‘problem’ vs. ‘solution’, ‘capable’ vs. ‘incapable.’ The complexity involved in learning to teach is strangely absent. (p. 4)

However, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that narrative opens up possibilities for teachers to inquire into their own professional lives beyond the mere telling of stories as an act of inquiry.

In Anderson's work with teacher stories, she identifies four questions critical to narrative inquiry: "Why are these stories being told?" This first question deals with ways stories offer familiar themes and encourage comparisons of the listener and teller. "Whose stories are these?" This second question involves the differentiation between first-person stories, third-person stories, and meta-stories. "To what extent do they [stories] contribute to our collective knowledge about teachers and teaching?" This third question deals with what the storyteller learns, what the listener learns, and the value of the stories for community members. "To what extent does the conceptual framework contribute to our collective knowledge about teachers and teaching?" (p. 133) Answering this fourth question enables us to explain how teachers choose and accept some ideas over others; why teachers engage in some practices and avoid others; and why teachers embrace some changes and reject others.

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) emphasize the critical relationship between researcher and practitioner of the study whereby all practitioners have voice within the relationship. The researcher listens first to the practitioner's story, thus allowing time and space so that the story gains authority and validity. The authors conclude that:

...narrative inquiry is, however, a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorytelling as the research proceeds. In the process of beginning to live the shared story of narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard. (p. 4)

In Chase's review of narrative inquiry, she cites autoethnography as another approach where researchers "turn the analytic lens on themselves and their interactions with others, but here researchers write, interpret, and/or perform their own narratives about culturally significant experiences" (2005, p. 660).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a genre of writing in research that connects the personal to the cultural. It is written in a form that moves between story and social context. According to Carolyn Ellis (2004), "this form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-conscious and introspection... [and] claims the conventions of literary writing" (p. XIX). In "Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political," Stacy Holman Jones (2005) describes autoethnography as a balancing act between autoethnography and writing about autoethnography. She further states, "autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement – between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change" (p. 764).

The focus of autoethnographic writing, according to Jones, is to create an emotional experience that "connects to and separates from, other ways of knowing, being and acting in/on the world" (p. 767). Autoethnographers use an ethnographic perspective by examining the social and cultural aspects of personal experiences. In addition, they consider their inward experience, showing a vulnerable self that is "moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 739).

As the autoethnographer moves between the inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become fuzzy.

Autoethnographic writing takes many artistic forms, such as short stories, poetry, photographic essays, journals, and layered writing. Usually written in the first person, this type of writing can include concrete action, dialog, emotion, and embodiment. These features appear “as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language” (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 739). The autoethnographic text is frequently void of academic language and abstracted theory. The autoethnographer regards the importance of story over analysis, favoring alternative readings and diverse interpretations of the text. Laurel Richardson argues that autoethnographers “ask their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 745).

In “Using Autoethnography in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Reflective Practice from ‘the Other Side of the Mirror,’” Fernanda Duarte (2007) writes about her recollections and reflections that occurred during her participation in a professional development project at the School of Management at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. As a teacher in higher education for over fifteen years, her participation in the project altered her outlook on teaching and learning as it forced her to reflect deeply on her own teaching. Duarte uses autoethnography whereby she becomes the phenomenon

of investigation as research, and uses her reflections that occurred during the project to document shifts in consciousness. She shares the following:

Most importantly, my autoethnography made salient the importance of reflective practice – or the ability to identify and scrutinize the underlying assumptions on the way we teach. It demonstrated how intelligent reflection led me to view my practice as a teacher through a different set of lenses, transforming me into a learner. Through this metamorphosis I became ‘the other,’ which in turn prompted me to appraise my experience more critically from the other side of the mirror. (p. 9-10)

According to Nancy Taber (2010), autoethnography explores both the self and the social; thus the author is both informant and investigator, with “different emphases in self and social” (p. 14). She argues that research requires an empirical basis; otherwise it should be termed storytelling, an important contribution to understanding the world, but not necessarily categorized as research (p. 14). Ellis and Bochner (1999) take the perspective that narratives of autoethnography provoke crucial issues and their consequences. The authors ask, “What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?” (p. 746) Similarly, Jones (2005) challenges autoethnographic research to create disturbances, to provoke, to raise questions, and to implicate authors and audiences (p. 784).

## **Context and Procedures of the Study**

I graduated from university with a Bachelor's in Education in 2001. I started my teaching career when I was 25. Although I have not taught in an inner-city school, I have held several short-term contracts in schools with such a designation. As mentioned earlier, prior to becoming a teacher, I spent four years as a camp leader and after-school director for programs in inner-city locations. I became a teacher because I enjoy working with children. I feel that I have talent for sharing my knowledge in an engaging way for kids. I also feel that I have patience and empathy for my students, which help strengthen student-teacher bonds and create a strong sense of community.

In January of 2007, I decided to work toward a Master of Arts in Education. I felt a return to academia would further develop and refine my skills as an educator. I entered a Master of Education cohort program offered at the University of British Columbia. The cohort consisted of 27 teachers who teach in urban contexts in different schools around Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. The program is designed for educators to reflect on their classroom practices through the lens of communal praxis: how teaching and curricular narratives are shaped by the social, institutional, and cultural perspectives, multiple literacies, and environments of lived experience. For two and a half years the cohort participated in courses together, with topics that included narrative inquiry, urban education, and the child in global society. Within these classes, personal and private stories emerged from the teachers. I began to notice a theme – teacher experiences of stress and burnout. Since this theme also echoed in my own stories, as well as the private



stories I heard from colleagues in staffrooms, I decided to study this critical and prevailing phenomenon.

### **Context of the Study**

In order to hear specific instances and experiences of teacher stress and burnout, I elected to elicit stories from teachers in a small focus group setting. I recruited the participants/storytellers from the Master's cohort described above for the following reasons: all members, including myself, had been part of this community of learners; we had just spent two and a half years together as graduate students reflecting on our practices; we had already built a strong community of trust and care as colleagues; and, we had already shared personal and private stories on a range of topics and issues in courses, and at a three-week institute on teachers' life writing.

For the recruitment, I emailed a letter of initial contact (see Appendix 2) to all 27 members of the cohort. The letter contained information about the context of the study and the intentions of the focus group conversation:

- to share stories around instances of teacher stress or burnout in your own practice;
- to describe experiences of beneficial professional development and personal activities that help you deal with teacher stress and burnout.

At that time, I had hoped to have three sessions: two 90-minute group sessions and one 45-minute individual follow-up session. Given that the cohort members were committed to their own MEd Capstone projects at the time, as well as writing end-of-the-year report

cards, there was a lack of volunteers. In consultation with my thesis supervisor, I sent out an email to the cohort with the following text:

In order to make the focus group more manageable, there is the possibility that we could meet just one time instead of two as I previously indicated. The session might then last longer (2 hours) but we would no longer be required to meet in person after that. If I had any follow-up questions/clarifications I could simply phone or email you.

Eight elementary teachers responded to the new format and I invited the first six to participate in the focus group with myself. All six participants signed a letter of consent (see Appendix 3). I was the only male member of the focus group of seven (in the cohort of 27, there were only four men). Also, there were only two secondary teachers. This cohort was consistent with the previous six cohorts which comprised mostly female elementary teachers.

Once the group of participants was established, I sent a second email to the six volunteers outlining the guiding questions around burnout for the focus group stories and discussion:

1. Can you recall a significant instance of stress as a teacher that led you to re-think your desire and ability to be an educator?
2. How would you describe burnout for a practicing teacher?
3. What factors do you believe contribute to burnout for practicing teachers?

For further discussion in the focus group around coping strategies, I included these additional guiding questions:

1. What examples can you give of professional development that you found useful to teacher stress and teacher burnout?
2. Do you believe that there is adequate professional development around teacher stress and teacher burnout?
3. What are some personal activities or strategies that have been helpful for your own dealing with stress and potential burnout?

All of the participants arrived at the meeting location early. The building was familiar – it was the same place we had met every week for the past two and a half years as cohort colleagues. The room was small, but the acoustics were ideal. I began the session by outlining the study, its purpose, the research questions, and what I hoped we would accomplish in our two hours together. We had much to cover. I wanted the session to flow smoothly and freely. I could tell the group was looking for direction. So, I began by telling my story of stress and burnout first. Over the next 90 minutes, each participant/storyteller in turn told her own account of being pushed to the edge as a teacher. Sometimes, I would interject with a question for clarification, but for the most part I remained quiet, taking notes, listening. After each story, a brief discussion among the group spontaneously ensued, mostly to offer the narrator some words of empathy or understanding – the stories were emotional.

When the stories of burnout were exhausted, I asked the group about professional development and coping. We only had 30 minutes left. I again started the round table discussion. We each talked about, and judged, the in(adequacy) of professional development around teacher stress and burnout. This was followed by a brief example of how each participant copes with the burdens of teaching.

The entire focus group session was digitally recorded and later transcribed as data. I noted body language and instances of emotion in notes as the participants/storytellers spoke. In order to preserve the flow and integrity of each story, I did little editing of the transcripts, correcting only minor grammar mistakes as well as connecting sentences to ensure a narrative flow. Below is an example of the transcript version followed by the semi-edited version, which appears in Chapter 4:

Storyteller: I've been teaching for five years now, I've been at the same school, and two weeks ago I was told two seconds before the staff meeting that I was being surplus. Um, because we are losing a division, and literally I was told two seconds before the staff meeting. I had no idea it was coming.

As Edited: I've been teaching for five years now at the same school. Just recently, I was told that I was being designated as surplus, as the school is losing a division. I was told two seconds before the school staff meeting. I had no idea it was coming.

I reviewed all of the stories several times, highlighting the particulars revealed in words and phrases I deemed meaningful, such as, “unsupported”, “I was shocked, embarrassed, devastated”, “nobody’s really out there to help”, “I was again surplus.” I looked for a sense of order to what I had highlighted. I looked for patterns, and organized them into themes. I collapsed the themes into four: stability, relationships, control, and acculturation. In Chapter 5, I present a conceptual framework, which elaborates these four themes and connects them to the literature on burnout. Using the analogy of balance,

I situate the themes in the space teachers live in between the call and the burden. In doing so, the themes situate when and how the burden becomes too heavy.

### **My Stories**

As researcher, I listened to the stories of burnout told by the focus group. Their narratives were emotionally charged – their body language told a story too. Some members laughed in remembrance of the ridiculous; others clenched their fists in memory of the outrageous; one cried with thoughts and feelings still too raw and fresh to ignore. As a colleague, I understood their emotions, I empathized with their accounts. As a teacher, I too had my own ridiculous, outrageous, and raw narratives.

Every member of the focus group spoke of a different teacher stressor: a difficult class, a surplus designation, an aggressive colleague, a forceful parent, a disrespectful administrator, a new classroom. For each of their stories, I realized I had a similar teacher experience. I wanted, maybe even needed, to tell my stories as well. As I listened, and later read the stories of each focus group member, my mirror experiences spilled into this thesis. In many ways, I did not choose the stories; they surfaced on their own. Simply hearing the secret and emotional stories of the focus group elicited my own private narratives. Autoethnography allowed my voice to enter into the thesis. I am not an outsider, I am immersed inside the teacher culture, and my stories are relevant to this study. My stories promote clarity around the crucial issue of burnout and demonstrate its devastating consequences to the teaching community.

## Storytellers

### Emily:

Emily is a veteran teacher of 24 years. She began her teaching career at the age of 26. During her tenure, Emily has taught at many locations including three schools with an inner-city designation. Emily became a teacher because, “my elementary school experience was such a positive one and I wanted to be just like the teachers in the way they inspired me to be a better person.” Emily is a leader. She is an organized overseer who will always make sure the needs of the group are met. She is bold in her words, but has a kind way of expressing her thoughts, visions and ideas.

### Chloe:

Chloe has been teaching since 1979. She began her teaching career at the age of 25, taking seven years off while raising her three children. Chloe has worked at several locations, none of which have been inner-city schools. Chloe became a teacher because of her influential teachers/mentors. Emily writes:

I found my feet taking me in that direction. I took fine arts courses in the Faculty of Education because I liked the courses better than those in the Faculty of Arts. As I took courses I noticed that a number of the professors were not only well-known artists, but outstanding teachers. They were inspiring to say the least. I went through Education with a huge amount of skepticism about teaching in general but was truly won over by my mentors. I was never following a calling. I was won over and am so glad I was.

Chloe is a storyteller. Through her stories, she exudes a caring spirit that attracts listeners to her presence. Chloe is a social person who constantly offers motherly words of support.

Sara:

Sara began teaching at the young age of 21. Although she has been an educator for over twenty years, she did take some extended time off to raise her children. Over the course of her career, Sara has had two years of experience as a teacher in an inner-city school. Sara became a teacher because, “I love working with children. I thought I could make a positive influence in their lives and in our society.” Sara embodies wisdom and experience. She is a natural leader who guides others with encouragement and gentle direction. Her ideas and stories capture the attention of those in her attendance.

Janine:

Janine is a beginning teacher of six years. She began her career at age 25, with one of those years teaching in an inner-city school. Janine became a teacher because “I have always loved working with kids. I have also always regarded teaching as a practice that allows you to exercise creativity. Teaching has been appealing to me because every day is a new day which brings about challenges and keeps you on your toes.” Janine brings a calm respect to those in her presence. Although quiet, her actions and intentions speak loudly. Janine is consistently willing to dedicate her time and expertise to assist friends and colleagues.

Andie:

Andie graduated from University in 1971. After starting her teaching career at 21, Andie taught full-time for seven years before taking a leave of absence when she had her first baby. From 1978 to 1995, Andie was either on a parental leave or teaching part-time. In 1996, Andie went back to full time teaching after her youngest child went into grade four. She is currently working 80% time at a British Columbia university as a Faculty Advisor in an Education program. Andie became a teacher because “I found my education was all about conformity and I wanted to make a change.” Andie is a voice for change and reform. She continually strives to make the world a better place. In doing so, Andie leads by example. When Andie needs to recharge, she seeks solace in Pt. Roberts, her sanctuary of beauty and her sense of home.

Charlie:

Charlie has been teaching since 2001. She was 21 years of age when she first entered the classroom. During her eight years of experience, three have been spent in an inner-city location. Charlie became a teacher because “I love children and feel that my positive outlook on life and learning are an inspiration to children and some staff which makes me feel good, too. I also really love the holidays and lifestyle the career offers my life and family.” Charlie radiates positive energy. Her endless supply of care and affection for others is always reflected in her cheerful demeanor and kind smile. Charlie’s eternal love for people, animals, and the environment is a refreshing vision that inspires those around her.



**Field Note: The Need for Teacher Stories**

Why did I want to hear and share stories, especially when I could've used surveys? Why did I go deeper into experiences through stories?

I've heard and told lots of stories in the staffroom. Should they stay in the staffroom? Why do I want stories about burnout to be told?

When I was a new teacher I listened to the stories of veterans. They made me laugh. They made me scared. It wasn't long before I had my own stories, both funny and frightening. Who do I tell my stories to? Who is my audience? Who cares?

## **CHAPTER 3: TEACHER STORIES FROM THE EDGE**

**TOCing:**

**It was the only day I really cried...**

**(Charlie)**

I had one situation where I was a teacher-on-call for a grade 7 classroom in an inner-city school. It was my second year teaching in British Columbia but it was my sixth year teaching because I taught before in Ontario. I was a pretty confident teacher. Never shed a tear - always felt that I could manage anything.

I came in the morning – grade 7 class – their actual teacher was still in the school but acting as vice-principal. So, you would expect that the students would not be too far off the ball because their teacher was still in the school.

It was just a matter of the kids having layers and layers of distrust with community and possibly what was going on at home. I guess just a product of their past – not a positive one. Before recess I could not get the students to take out anything and work together. So, it was a big challenge for me, but I was game to take it on as I had not had a challenge like this yet. I had done so many things – tried to open my heart to them, tried to share my time – and it was not getting anywhere at all. But still in my heart I thought I could definitely do this.

At recess the kids were pretty much at the door before the bell rang. I was standing at the door trying to connect with them saying, “Have a good recess!” But one student just stood in the doorway with his arms crossed facing me really closely – and it was uncomfortable.

I was so surprised at how powerful they felt they were. And they were. And that was really disturbing for me.

I spent the recess period just trying to refocus. “What can I do?” I was going to continue being and sharing my heart. I was going to let them do what they felt they wanted to do in the class because obviously what I was going to do was not going to work. But still this did not work.

By the end of the day I did not get anywhere with them. No matter what I asked them to do, it was not happening. They were treating me as if I was their worst enemy. I teach, and always have, with all my heart and for the kids. I want kids to feel like they are cared for. This was the only day I really cried. I left the school without even returning the keys because my mind was so distraught and my heart was hurt. The fact that I could not do something with this group of kids did not put me in a place where I felt burned out. But, it did question my capabilities and this would have led to burnout had I had a consistent position like that.

This was a school where I just felt that I could not accept a future job. This was hard for me to accept because I was a person who felt so confident and capable – I had a number of teaching years behind me already. I started feeling bad about myself because I had to say “no” to a school where the children need so much. But who is going to stay with those kids – to be with those kids?

**TOCing:**

**I almost quit that first year...**

**(Greg)**

[Alarm clock]  
“Ticking away the moments  
That make up a dull day  
Fritter and waste the hours  
In an off-hand way”

Typically my cell phone rings at 5:30 a.m. If I am lucky, I won't hear Pink Floyd's "Time" until 6:00 a.m.

Another day, another school, another class, this is my life as a Teacher-On-Call (TOC).

Financially, I'm unable to refuse a teaching assignment. Although expenses are below that of my university days, most months I find my salary is below the provincial poverty line. Monetary stress is taxing, both mentally and physically. However, I'm able to eat. Several financial institutions offer credit cards with only a 20% interest rate.

When the TOC office phones in the morning I always accept the placement. I'm a non-musical band instructor; I'm an English-speaking French immersion specialist; I'm an urban wilderness instructor in Squamish, B.C. Some days I'm asked to be a special education instructor, an ESL teacher, a girl's high school gym coach, a sex education teacher, a learning assistance instructor. On any given morning I must become a calculus expert, a physics whiz, a history guru. In the eyes of the school district, I'm apparently proficient in computer programming, food preparation, drama coordination.... I masquerade as a specialist in every imaginable (non)teaching field. Already my TOC resume is incredible.

To be honest, however, I'm one of the fortunate graduates. Many of my university peers are unable to secure a TOC position with any local school districts after graduation. Last I heard, many either ignored their Education degree to pursue other occupational

interests, or moved back with their parents. As I no longer have a key to my parent's home and no more money to pursue other educational passions, I continue to build my teaching seniority and hope that one day I will have stability in the form of a full-time classroom.

Often during my assignments I feel more like a babysitter than a teacher. The consequence of accepting *every* assignment is routine placements in difficult classrooms. Rarely do I actually teach. Frequently, I arrive in a classroom that has no lesson plan or classroom schedule. Try engaging a class of teenagers with no idea of what to teach. I'm often greeted in the morning with cries of, "Ms. X is away, party!" And staffrooms are often just as cold. I remember one teacher threatening to have a car towed because a TOC parked in her space. Luckily, I parked down the street to avoid any such scandal and embarrassment. Seven years of university, including two in Education, and I am a certified babysitter in charge of crowd-control.

Working in an environment with children is working in an environment steeped with germs. In my mind a school is similar to a Petri dish - a container often used to culture bacteria cells. But a TOC is resilient. We have to be. Missing a day of work is missing a rent payment. And, as districts often do not pay for extended medical or dental benefits, a visit with a doctor is often an expensive appointment. I take a lot of vitamins. I should be okay.

By June I'm exhausted. For many full-time teachers, the summer is the time for recharging the body and mind. Two months away from the classroom environment becomes a necessary break from the daily stresses inherent in the job. Unfortunately, the work of a TOC typically does not cease at the end of the term. In fact, summer school and tutoring is a necessary byproduct of a lack of call-out days and an inadequate daily wage. I need to eat this summer. I need to pay my rent.

I almost quit that first year. To be honest, I often think about life and professions outside of the classroom environment. To put it simply, I wasn't prepared for the hardships that awaited me after graduation. I have several binders full of lesson plans, unit plans, game plans, but the fact is, no amount of plans prepare you for the reality of being a TOC. My life has no occupational or financial stability. I'm always waiting for that next call. I'm always on the move. I'm always stressed-out.



**Becoming Surplus:**

**I felt that I was not really cared for...**

**(Janine)**

I've been teaching for five years now at the same school. Just recently I was told that I was being designated as surplus as the school is losing a division. I was told two seconds before the school staff meeting. I'd no idea it was coming. I thought it was disrespectful, the manner in which I was told.

When I went home I felt really lost and upset as I'd spent five years at this school. I was surplus because I was the staff member with the lowest seniority. I'd just committed myself to this school for so many years. I had known the kids. I had made special connections. I taught K-Bear and now I teach grade 4/5. So, when I went home I was really stressed out because in a matter of a second I felt that I was out in the general hiring pool and really not cared for. I find that extremely stressful in our occupation. I am now just a number again.

Now I'm told by the district to "go find a job." That is stressful. I know I'm guaranteed a full-time position. But, at the same time, not knowing what positions are out there, which schools are available, is really stressful. It becomes my job to find a position and I feel nobody is really out there to help. Sure, I can call people for advice (the school board or the teachers' union) but at the end of the day, I really feel that I'm on my own, up against so many people. The genuine nature of everyone is to try and protect themselves. The big questions become, are we cared for as educators? Who looks after us?

And now I fear I can be placed anywhere in any position by the district. I have a friend who went through the surplus process. She was a primary teacher and she was put in an intermediate class. She asked, "Isn't there something in primary somewhere in the district?" She was told, "Really that is not your choice, you should be happy you're given a job."

What I also find really frustrating and stressful is that when it comes down to asking questions, it seems that nobody knows the answers. You call and you find getting a call back from the district or union takes two days. It's my life, and my job, that's being played around with.

**Becoming Surplus:**

**I was sent to the principal's office...**

**(Greg)**

I was called to the office just before recess. As the announcement came over the school-wide P.A. system, the entire class heard the administrative request. My grade 7's could not contain enthusiasm or ridicule at the notion that their teacher was being sent to the principal's office.

At any age, the thought of meeting with the school principal can be intimidating. As a child, I remember being absolutely terrified of my school principal. A student is rarely called down to the office for something positive. As an adult, I'm still wary about many of my school administrators. A teacher is rarely called down to the office for something positive.

The walk was long. Life seems to slow down at the thought of looming bad news. I stopped at the water fountain to get a drink and calm my nerves. It didn't help.

You know you're in trouble when the principal closes the door before beginning the meeting. If positive news is forthcoming, the office door is always left ajar. In this case, who cares if an eavesdropping staff member overhears the conversation? But, if the news forthcoming is negative, then the meeting remains private. In this case, an eavesdropping staff member may hear the sad/angry cries of the conversation.

My principal closed the door after I entered - an ominous sign. His office was disorganized. I had to move several unsigned report cards to sit down. I noticed his chair was large and padded; mine was small and uncomfortable.

In the administrator's handbook, there must be a chapter on "Acceptable Practices to Follow When Informing Employees of Shocking News." Section 1 - make the recipient feel empowered and appreciated. This will decrease the impact of the news and thereby avoid possible emotional responses from the employee.

My principal started the meeting by praising my first year with the school. I must admit I did feel empowered and appreciated. However, my initial feeling of uneasiness was answered with news that I was being “surplused” from the school at the end of the year.

I was shocked.

I was embarrassed.

I was devastated.

After my years in the trenches as a Teacher-On-Call, I’d finally realized my dream of teaching in my own classroom. I no longer had to wake to the 5:30 a.m. call-out assignments. I no longer had to port all of my teaching supplies to a different school each day. I no longer had to make six-hour superficial bonds with students. I was a teacher with my own students, my own classroom, and my own personal and financial stability.

“Acceptable Practices to Follow When Informing Employees with Shocking News.” Section 2 – after revealing the news, allow the employee time to reflect.

I was speechless. And, following the Administrator’s Handbook, the principal was wordless as well. We both sat in silence until the recess bell signaled for 15 minutes of playtime liberty. So, while almost 300 children cheered toward their freedom, I slowly left the office and walked toward the staff washroom. It was locked.

My emotions were beginning to well and I just needed a private space to gather my thoughts and feelings. A school is very much a public building with limits on personal rooms. I hid in the custodian closet. The room was dark; the air was musty; the furnace was deafening. I was afforded 15 minutes to cry amongst the cleaning supplies and dirty mops. Then, the second bell chimed across the grounds. The children’s fun time was up, my concealed time was

over. The students crowded noisily through the packed halls toward class. I left the closet and followed.

I still had to teach that day.

The last day of school I packed all of my personal belongings. I had to be out immediately since another teacher claimed my classroom for the next school year. Apparently my room has a better view.

That would not be the last trip to the principal's office. Over the next three years, I would have to again pay my dues as a beginning teacher. The following year I was laid off by the school district, only to be rehired by another school. The next year, I was again surplused. I have now been teaching for over seven years. In almost every year I have been threatened with being either laid-off or surplused again. With school closures and budget deficits this year, I fear another trip to the principal's office is inevitable.

**Colleagues:**

**He was mad, and he was out to get me...**

**(Andie)**



I kind of like to think that I get along with everybody. I was brought up to look for the goodness in everyone and not the bad.

I came back to a school from a three-year leave. In this particular school there was only one male on staff. He was around my age. He'd been around for awhile but just started teaching later in his life. We got along really well. We both taught grade 7.

That year, for some reason, he was pulled out of his classroom minutes before the bell and did not return to the school for about two months. The staff was all gossiping, whispering his story. I chose not to listen; I didn't want to know.

While he was away I was planning the grade 7 year and graduation. This particular school went all out. They brought in a stage, had the kids playing in the band. They had a dinner banquet and a big ceremony.

The principal at the school that year was new at the time and she said to me, "This is a bit much for grade 7 – they are graduating, they are moving on – it is a celebration." I agreed. I didn't think the students needed a stage. I didn't think the girls needed to be sitting with their legs apart, playing their instruments in pretty dresses. The male teacher wasn't there so the principal and I made an administrative decision to cancel the stage for the graduation.

He came back near the end of the year and found out that there was change. Some people don't cope well with change. I think change can be positive. He didn't like it. He was mad and he was out to get me. He blamed me.

I was in the staff room one morning and he had been back for one day. He heard about the modifications to the graduation and he came storming into the room and literally yelled inches from my face. He just started giving it to me. And this was hard for me

because I'd lived with a man like this for twenty-five years and I finally had the courage to leave him. I'm not good at standing up to bullies, but I stood up to him. I just gave it back to him. I said, "Do not speak to me like that. It was a decision made when you were not here. Give it a chance. If it does not work we will go back."

He was angry. His eyes were bugging out. Colleagues would walk into the staffroom and turn around and go out. Nobody came to help me.

That was five years ago. He's still mad at me. He's really nasty to me. He snaps his words at me. He's sarcastic. He rolls his eyes. He criticizes my teaching. He makes comments to the students like, "Did Mrs. X teach you last year?"

Once when I was setting up something in the gym he entered. I asked, "Oh, do you want those pictures hung on the wall?" He would look at me and sarcastically remark, "Duh! Obviously I have them on the floor for a reason!" My colleagues look at me and ask, "Does he always talk to you like that?" I simply reply, "Yes."

This situation causes me stress all of the time – this is my fifth year with him.

But I'm nice to him. In fact, I think that bothers him even more. I just cannot reciprocate the behavior. I figure the guy must be hurting. But it has been very hard on me. I think about it a lot. I wish that I didn't... I wish that I could let it go.

I know there are things I can do. I have been there with grievances and I just do not want to... he is scary. I wish, when I was younger, that I'd been empowered to handle people like that.

I will just move on.

**Colleagues:**

**The staffroom was cold and uninviting...**

**(Greg)**

The front of the school was welcoming. The building was freshly painted. The grounds were clean and tastefully manicured, even the freshly paved parking lot appeared to be an inviting beacon to teachers and students. This was my first day at a new school.

After only a year of full-time teaching, I was laid off by the school district in June. Cringing at the thought of returning to the Teacher-On-Call list, I was excited when I was rehired the following September. My assignment wasn't ideal. I had to share my time between two schools on opposite sides of the city: Monday to Wednesday teaching a split-grade class; Thursday and Friday teaching Non-Instructional Time (NIT) to five intermediate classes. Between the two locations, I had over 150 students. The subjects were diverse. And, as I was hired days before the start of the school year, I scrambled to grasp the new curriculum and procure relevant resources. Even so, I was energized on the first day of school.

I arrived at school early. The staff-parking lot was open, but unoccupied. Although the school lights were on, the front entrance was locked. I did not have key, so I jogged around the perimeter of the school hoping to find an open door. After two laps, I was out of breath. I decided to wait at the front entrance.

After twenty minutes I was anxious. Where are the teachers? Was today the first day of school? Will I have enough time to organize my classroom and lessons? Finally, I noticed the custodian vacuuming the main hallway. After several loud knocks I managed to catch his attention. After a short introduction, the custodian unlocked my new classroom.

What a mess! Although the floors and blackboard were cleaned over the summer, the classroom was littered with boxes and books. Apparently my new room had become a storage room for the school. By 8:30 a.m., the rest of the staff was finally arriving. While I made a point to smile and introduce myself, my greetings weren't

ardently reciprocated. In fact, one teacher, after a lethargic welcome, insisted that I become aware of the staff parking procedures. Apparently I had parked out-of-place. Thanks for the information; nice to meet you, too.

At recess, the staffroom was equally uninviting. I quickly realized that staff cliques had formed in the room, probably years before my arrival. Many of the groups talked loudly about their summer holidays. Sadly, I wasn't invited into their stories. Childhood memories and emotions flooded my mind. I was back in grade 8, the new kid standing in the cafeteria waiting for someone to offer a kind face or an invitation to sit down. Like grade 8, no invite ever came. Finally, I forced my way into a group and waited patiently to tell my story. The recess bell chimed before I could speak.

By the end of my first day at my new school I felt depleted. Although I had an amazing day with my new class, I felt a sense of emptiness. Regrettably this feeling would not dissipate. For the remainder of the year I felt unsupported. Apart from a hallway nod, I often arrived at school in the morning, and left the school in the evening, without a word with my colleagues. There was very little staff connection, inside or outside of school hours. The roar of voices during that first recess was muted. The staffroom was quiet. Sometimes I would mark in my classroom at lunch to avoid the deafening silence in the staffroom.

One colleague in particular didn't like me. I can still hear her high-heel shoes echoing down the hallway toward my room. If I was quick enough I could hide in the cloakroom. More often than not, she reached the doorway first. She was a bully; quick to judge and a constant authoritarian. I remember one particular confrontation in which she berated me for "stealing" her gym time. I must admit, I didn't check my watch, I was playing floor hockey with my class. And while I was not her only target, I was her favorite. I must have parked in her parking spot.

That year was difficult for me; not in the classroom, but in the staffroom. The absence of a supportive work environment made me feel dejected. I felt alone. At the end of the year I was designated as surplus and forced to change schools. I missed the students. I didn't miss the school.

**Parents:**

**I went and hid...**

**(Chloe)**

I have many stories in many areas related to stress and teaching. But there is one particular story that really left me wondering whether I would show up another day. The story I'm going to put up is about a parent.

I had one particular father that often showed up in my school and was really aggressive.

The father moved in right across the street, literally a stone's throw away from the front door of the school. In this case the father was not working. So, he was coming in to see me almost daily! He had a lovely child but the boy was quite sensitive and struggled with school work. Sometimes at recess he would, against the rules, go home upset. His father would come back with him to the school and knock on the staffroom door and ask for me to come out.

In a confrontational manner the father would often say, "Chris came home crying, what did you do to him this morning?"

It got to the point by November that this man was regularly marching into the staffroom and loudly demanding that we needed to talk. And I felt that at this point I could still make this situation work. I would go out with him into another room and I would try to calm him down. But, it was getting more and more confrontational to the point that his fists were clenched and his shoulders were forward.

And then one day he came up to get me in my classroom and I noticed his eyes were just flashing and his jaw was set. Luckily one of my colleagues, who worked next to me, noticed the situation and said, "X, get out of here." My colleague got me out of the classroom by basically blocking the father so I could scoot out and disappear.

I literally went and hid. This is something that I never, in my wildest dreams, thought I would do. Later I came upstairs and



peered into my classroom to make sure that he was not there. I thought, “Oh my god, what is this job doing to me?”

So, I stumbled down to the principal and explained the situation. My principal, in a sort of cowboy accent, was like, “Okay, little lady, I’ll take care of you.” He gave me the line, “I can handle anybody.” The principal just phoned the father up and said, “Any time there’s an issue you come and I’ll go talk to the teacher. You can’t talk to her that much.”

So they were having daily conversations. But the principal finally came to me and went, “You have to handle this parent!” I just looked at him. I just looked. He continued, “I don’t have time, he’s taking two hours of my time every single day.” And I just looked at him. I was stunned. I was speechless. I burst into tears and said, “I can’t do that!” And the principal is looking at me like, “Oh God, she’s crying.” But I am sobbing. I finally said, “If he comes... I can’t function, always looking over my shoulder to see when and where he’s coming up the stairs.”

At this point it was only December. And so I had to deal with this guy for the remainder of the year without the support of my principal. And I was getting to the point of burnout. I was younger at the time so I didn’t know you could put provisos on parents who are abusive. None of that information was told to me. And my principal obviously wasn’t willing to go that step even though he was a fairly experienced administrator.

I should’ve done a whole bunch of things but I didn’t and I should have. Maybe we are just very naïve because we care about the kids so much.

I have taught at that school now for eighteen years. I feel the school atmosphere has been getting more and more to the point where parents are feeling more empowered to the point of being abusive.

I'm really finding that the fall-out from that whole Ministry of Education's directive toward "parents being partners in education" is that parents are being less than constructive-in fact destructive in terms of our relationships with them.

**Parents:**

**Her demeanor from the beginning was aggressive and confrontational...**

**(Greg)**

Parents can be a teacher's greatest helper. They can offer help in a chaotic classroom, volunteer transport to students on a special field-trip, bestow a needed bottle of wine at the end of a long term. Conversely, parents can also be a teacher's worst nightmare...

I should've been more assertive. But I was still so new to the teaching profession.

She came for an unannounced meeting on a Thursday afternoon. I remember because the meeting lasted for several hours and I consequently missed my evening volleyball game at Jericho Beach. Her demeanor from the beginning was aggressive and confrontational. Her face was red and her feet seemed to pound the dirty floor as she approached my desk. Before even beginning the conversation, I knew this was going to be a difficult and unpleasant meeting. Body language speaks volumes.

Her daughter received a B on a recent science test. Both mother and daughter were not pleased with the evaluation and demanded an explanation. In a polite and calm voice, I tried to explain to the defensive mother that her child often chose to socialize in class rather than following the pertinent lessons. To be honest, a B was a generous grade considering the effort she exuded in class.

My explanation wasn't good enough. The mother quickly tried to excuse her daughter's behavior by turning the blame on to me – my lessons were not engaging, my teaching style did not motivate and highlight the way in which her daughter learns.

The meeting continued with the parent questioning virtually every aspect of my test and evaluation procedures. It didn't help that this particular parent was a teacher herself, well versed with the B.C. curriculum. In a way, she used her position as a threat, demanding links to relevant learning outcomes, and insisting I explain how each outcome was achieved.

I should've been more assertive.

After the meeting I was physically and emotionally deflated. To be honest, I left that ridiculously long discussion with a feeling of inadequacy. I questioned my teaching knowledge, my teaching ability, and even my commitment to the students. I felt like shit. I called in sick the next day.

Unfortunately, this impromptu discussion wasn't an isolated experience. For the remainder of the year I was a target. I received numerous calls, emails, and staffroom visits before, after, and during school hours. She threatened to contact my administration and talk to other parents about her apprehension. I felt helpless. I felt like I was a part of a smear campaign.

Her obvious dislike for me also reflected in the behavior of her daughter. This particular girl was a nightmare in the classroom. She did whatever she felt like because she knew her mother would protect her and divert any blame. For me, the problem was that the student held a great deal of sway over other students in the class. To be honest, they were afraid of her and as a consequence would follow her every disruptive lead. As teachers, we witness this phenomenon all the time. If the parent is a bully, often so is the child. By June, I was relieved and ecstatic that the student (and her mother) was graduating from the school and wouldn't return. I tried to take solace in the knowledge that I wasn't the only teacher that had difficulties with this parent and student. The thought helped a little, but not a lot.

I should have been more assertive.

**Administration:**

**He divides and conquers the staff...**

**(Sara)**

What about our administrators? Just this past spring I was feeling so powerless and disrespected. I felt locked in conflict because the inner belief of my teacher's heart was so conflicted. My administrator wanted to bring a program into our school and it affected me directly. It affected K and it affected grade 1. And he was going to bring it in through the back door. I could see this whole thing happening. Not once was I asked if I was up to participating in the program, yet I'd be doing all the work. We had one particular meeting and I raised the issue that I talked to other kindergarten teachers in this district who said that there was a lot of testing involved; like days of testing involved with this one particular program. And so I brought this up, and I felt like I was not being heard at all. Instead, he brought this presenter in from the school board who spoke to the entire primary staff, yet I was going to be doing the work.

So, after some time evolved, I just felt like the whole thing was creating a rift between me and the administrator, me and my fellow colleagues, because some of them were swallowing this program hook, line, and sinker. Yet the K's and the 1's would be doing all of the work. I felt like it was shutting me down. And in fact, I couldn't sleep. Some nights I had headaches. I couldn't concentrate on what I loved to do. My joy was just stripped away from the classroom, and I felt like I was going to be expected to do all this testing on the children who have only been on this earth for five years.

So, I was feeling repulsed. I really felt that I was living in a culture of fear. I had my fear. My colleagues had their fears. The school board has their fears. My administrator has his fears. And, I feel like there is fear, fear, fear. We are just knotted and riddled with fear. It is passed on down the line. And why was my administrator so adamant that I do this program? Because he has to set these goals with his boss. I was the one getting shafted with this. My principal said, "Ya, you got to do this, it's going to be great!" I thought, "Oh this isn't going to be great. I don't need to be wasting two hours of

my life testing these kids. It's not worth it for me, and it's not worth it for them."

My administrator was telling me that I was not taking care; "It is really unfortunate that you are not participating in this initiative because it takes care of children who are 'at risk'." He wanted guilt. But, he has never even been a classroom teacher before. He has never taught primary before. He doesn't have a clue. He has never once congratulated any of the kids or anyone of the primary staff, telling them what a great job they are doing. And he uses this tactic; I've seen it many times before. He divides and conquers the staff. That is how he operates.

It doesn't end there. Other colleagues in other grade levels were saying, "Oh, we should really be doing this." They'd not seen the writing on the wall. They haven't talked to other teachers who have done this program. So, at this point, I still really don't feel like everything has been resolved. I'm just letting the dust settle. That's all that I can do. Start fresh again next year.



**Administrators:**

**My joy and enthusiasm eroded by the spring...**

**(Greg)**

I had a brilliant class that year. The students were a positive and caring group that I could engage, motivate, and laugh with. The staff was equally as extraordinary. They were a group of caring, motivated, and supportive teachers. The stage was set for an incredible year.

Administrative transfers at the end of the previous year moved our beloved principal to another school. As such, we had a new administrator at the start of the term. We quickly realized that our new manager had a different vision for the school than the previous administration. In fact, her ideas and initiatives were quite dissimilar from the needs and desires of the staff.

I hated staff meetings. As the principal tried to push her proposals on to the teachers, we pushed back as a collective group. Voices were often raised. Fingers were pointed. Blood pressures elevated. Instead of a supportive and collegial leadership, the school atmosphere felt more like a dictatorship, laden with blame and not praise.

She pulled me out of class on a Friday afternoon in October. I was in the middle of a lesson on Roman emperors. To be honest, I was surprised to see her; she usually ran the school from the confines of her office. Nevertheless I stopped my lesson. She didn't speak immediately, just looked at me with a judging gaze. I figured I was in trouble, I just didn't know why.

I did not sign up for the new reading program. I wasn't the only one. In a staff committee meeting, the teachers decided that the principal's reading initiative wasn't in the best educational interests of our students. The disruption to our classrooms, not to mention the hours of preparation time, was deemed too significant. The burden was to be on our shoulders and not hers. So, the sign-up sheet on the staffroom refrigerator was blank.

Rather than discuss the lack of staff participation as a group, the principal decided to confront the teachers individually. I was the first. She said I wasn't thinking about the best interests of my students. She insinuated that I wasn't a team player and that I was only looking out for my own time and well-being. She strongly suggested I reconsider my positioning as she was quite disappointed. I politely asked to resume my lesson.

In our next committee meeting, the staff discussed their individual encounters with the principal. Each story was the same. A class interrupted, an accusation made, hurt feelings. As a group we remained confident in our decision to avoid the refrigerator recruitment sheet. As a group we remained steadfast in our aims and goals for the school. We remained as a group.

Unfortunately, the fallout from the disagreement didn't go away. For the rest of the year there was a distinct division between the staff and administration. I think the principal took the confrontation personally - to be honest, so did I. Staff meetings were still heated, teachers continued to be cornered and the morale and spirit of the school was adversely affected. At the year-end staff celebration, the principal didn't make an appearance. I wasn't disappointed.

**Displacement:**

**Is this worth it?...**

**(Emily)**

I remember in one of my early years of teaching I was surprised from a school at the end of September. I was panicking, not knowing where I was going to go. I get a phone call [from the school board] explaining that I am going to this school and they are giving me one day to set-up my classroom. My boxes at least will be moved but I have to unpack.

So I arrive at this classroom and it is empty, bare, nothing – NOTHING. My boxes are there but nothing else. No furniture except for a hodgepodge of desks, a teacher’s desk, and all this ratty furniture that everybody else had not wanted in the school. So obviously, the room had been raided. I ended up with the dregs. So, I set up the room as nicely as I could. And then another teacher in the school said, “We are going to give you these best students. It is a dream class, you are only going to have nineteen children and I gave you the best of the best.”

I had nineteen students: 13 were boys, six were girls. It was a split class and the personalities in that class were dynamos. There were so many discipline issues in that class. They were like little animals, these kids. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I mean, I was at the beginning of my teaching career and I don’t have all the access to resources. I’m scrambling to try to put together a program. Not for just one grade now but for two grades. And so I spent late afternoons into the evenings and weekends organizing.

Every day I would have to take them out and get them to just run. The principal would be looking out, peering out the window watching us run around the school grounds. There were so many issues that came up in that classroom. I didn’t feel like I really had a lot of help in the school. And the parents were really wacky too. So, I felt that the staff were really sort of stepping back a few steps because they didn’t quite know what to think because the parents were crazy. They didn’t really want to involve themselves.

I got really sick just before the first report cards. I got bronchitis and it didn't go away until the end of the year. I had this illness all year. And, as a beginning teacher you don't have any sick leave. So I would be away some days and back.

It was so stressful that year that I just thought, is this worth it? Is it worth the expense of my health? Am I even getting anywhere with these kids? I'm not getting a lot of support from my colleagues or the administration. I don't really have a friend on staff that I could team-teach with. It was just really, really difficult.

And then near the end of the year, just when I finally got the furniture I wanted, when I had everything set up and everything was working well, I was surplus again.

So I think the long term trend of that repeated stress is illness. Physical ailments are the manifestation of stress. And eventually we just break down.

**Displacement:**

**Moving to a new school is never easy...**

**(Greg)**

Moving to a new school is never easy.

My family moved shortly after I finished grade seven. I was devastated. The thought and act of finding new friends is frightening and traumatizing for a young boy. I was upset. I was sad. I was scared. I remember that queasy feeling in my stomach on the eve of my first day at a new junior high school. My room seemed so small and cold that night. I remember that fear of walking into the cafeteria for the first time. Every set of eyes seemed to examine and judge me as I sat at a table alone. I recall the lonely walk home. The weather was hot and the road seemed upward and endless. Unfortunately, these stressful feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, and loneliness wouldn't easily subside. Moving to a new school is never easy.

As a teacher, enrolling in a new school offers a similar set of feelings and emotions. And, as a beginning teacher, I was no stranger to moving schools. As a Teacher-On-Call you expect change. In effect, that is your job. Every day you move to a different school, with a new staff, and a new class, and a new set of rules and procedures. As a Teacher-On-Call, you get used to such change very quickly. However, as a permanent teacher in a school, the thought of changing schools is devastating. As a continuing teacher you form strong bonds with the staff, students, and community.

I was designated as surplus at the end of the final term. I was upset. I was sad. I was scared. Alone, I was required to spend late nights at the end of the year packing and cleaning my old classroom. I remember the pain in my back lingered for many weeks following the move. And, my wife was not pleased with the boxes of my school materials I was required to store in our living room. With the designation of surplus came the uncertainty of the grade, subject(s), and school I'd be required to teach in the following school year. Summer is supposed to be that critical time for a teacher to relax and rejuvenate for the looming term. My summer was spent



anxiously and fearfully waiting by the phone for my placement in the fall. My hope was to receive my assignment early in the summer. With my direction in place I could begin to organize materials and plan my lesson plans. Unfortunately, I was notified of my new position the last week of August. Grade 7. I interviewed for the job over the phone as I finally decided to take a camping vacation in Banff National Park.

I remember that queasy feeling in my stomach on the eve of my first day at my new elementary school. My room seemed so large and lonely that night. I recall the fear of walking into the staffroom for the first time. Every set of eyes was examining and judging me as I sat at the teacher's table. Although this time I sat within a group, I still felt alone.

Fortunately my feelings of loneliness and apprehension were quickly extinguished. My new classroom was pleasantly clean and stocked with the necessary textbooks, boards, desks, and chairs. In fact, as I toured the school with a new colleague, I became keenly aware of the fact that my classroom was one of the finest in the school: a large space with plenty of storage, sun, and even a view.

As I was hired on short notice, my preparation and materials for the new grade 7 curriculum was insufficient and inadequate. However, several colleagues offered tremendous support by sharing resources, equipment, and ideas. As well, the administration routinely offered assistance by ordering needed resources and making sure my class composition and size was fair. So, on my first day, I felt prepared and ready, due in no small part to the staff.

Unfortunately, my positive transition experience may be an exception to the rule. I've moved into other schools with little preparation time, a poorly organized classroom, and a staff and administration that was not forthcoming with help or support. And, part of my trepidation about changing schools is echoed from the

stories of stress and disaster told by some of my former displaced colleagues. In their stories, along with my experience, I found that it is common for a teacher to be placed into a less than ideal position by the district. Or, once assigned to a location, the arriving teacher is given the least desirable classroom, with the toughest group of students.

Moving and transitions are never easy but with support, the transition can be manageable.

**Field Note: Teacher Stories**

I left the focus group session with mixed feelings. As a researcher I was satisfied. The storytellers were open and forthcoming - their stories were ideal for use as burnout data.

As a teacher and colleague, I felt distressed. The storytellers were open and forthcoming - their stories spoke of adversity and despair.

As both a researcher and teacher, I want these stories to provoke my audience. As both a researcher and teacher, I want these stories to incite change.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Workplace burnout is a problem in contemporary life. Teacher burnout is a prevailing and increasing phenomenon in education. While the more general literature on burnout is relevant to my study, I go deeper into the phenomenon, beyond the numbers, models, and indicators of burnout, beyond the lists of findings from surveys and questionnaires.

Useful future research could focus on the location of personal and individual stories inside the larger social, political, and cultural contexts of school community. My research, however, elicited teacher stories that identify specific instances of stress that led to burnout, as well as teachers' personal activities and strategies that help them cope with the stress they deal with as teachers.

To accomplish this charge, I decided that narrative inquiry is a powerful and appropriate research methodology which fits the intent of this study. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) outline, narrative inquiry is about a particular phenomenon, and is a way to explain the particulars as described by the ones who live it. In this chapter I provide a conceptual framework based on teacher stories as lived experiences on burnout, in order to facilitate meaning and dig deeper into the phenomenon. In my study, the storytellers know and trust each other; they are members of a learning community, reflecting on their practices. Hence, the narratives in this thesis are what Clandinin and Connelly (1996) identify as “secret stories” – those stories usually told to other teachers in confidential spaces.

In Chapter 3, I introduced Lorin Anderson's (1997) four questions critical to narrative inquiry:

- Why are these stories being told?
- Whose stories are these?
- To what extent do they [stories] contribute to our collective knowledge about teachers and teaching?
- To what extent does the conceptual framework contribute to our collective knowledge about teachers and teaching?

I find the first two questions to be related, and the most critical, in terms of sharing teachers' stories within and outside the teaching community. Regarding the telling of stories *within* the community, I asked the storytellers, via email, the following questions several weeks after the focus group session: "Was it valuable to tell your stories (in the focus group) and meet with colleagues? Why or why not?" Their comments focused on support and voice, community and relationships, and understanding and restoration. As both teacher and researcher, hearing the secret stories of teachers was both profound and significant. Ellis and Bochner (1999) argue that autoethnography provokes issues and their consequences within a culture, reminding me of what forces shape my professional life, as well as new possibilities that stories themselves introduce. As indicated below, the teachers' comments resonate with my own participation in the focus group.

I felt supported. I felt like I had a voice. Janine agrees, saying:

It was valuable to share my stories with the group because I got to voice and share my feelings, which sometimes does not happen in the hectic nature of a school. In such a group, I felt valued and cared for as others showed compassion.

Hearing the stories also reminded me that I am not alone in my experiences of stress and burnout. Sara reiterates this notion by explaining, “I could relate to others who shared similar experiences and frustrations. I was not alone. There were others who understood life in a classroom.” Emily also talks about the importance of teachers sharing their stories:

Yes it was valuable to share stories. I think educators need to be given time to share their narratives. We all learn from one another and we can share empathy with one another. There is comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our professions and that teaching, although a personal and emotionally giving activity, is one of the most isolatory professions.

Sharing our stories around teacher stress and burnout was restorative for me. I felt a reduced sense of tension and anxiety. As Chloe remarks, “It was also therapeutic to share and laugh about stories that most of us would never have laughed about at the time but, in hindsight, what else can you do?”

Anderson’s first question, regarding why tell the stories, also asks a narrative researcher to acknowledge the reasons and implications for making stories public, outside the community itself. In answering her *critical* question, the literature on narrative inquiry and autoethnography offers a rationale concerning change. That is, the understanding of the phenomenon by other audiences, particularly other stakeholders (e.g. administrators,

parents, policy makers, media, etc.), matters to implementing change. Jones (2005) argues that stories create disturbances in order to provoke, raise questions, and implicate authors *and* audiences. In the case of teacher burnout, the persistent burdens that teachers face are part of a larger, complex, context. Educational change that would deal with the phenomenon of burnout, would involve a wider audience, inside and outside education. Those stakeholders need to hear teachers' secret stories as opposed to the cover stories. Teachers cannot institute such complex changes alone.

Anderson's last two questions relate to the contributions of frameworks to collective knowledge about teachers and teaching. My framework, as described next, elaborates four themes connected to the stories, which describe living between the call and the burden, and when and how the burden becomes too heavy. The framework puts forward the act of balance as the fulcrum essential to living in this in-between space.

### **FRAMEWORK**

According to Anderson (1997), "stories themselves are a means to an end" (p. 134). The end is a conceptual framework that can be used for future understanding and explanation of teacher stories. Moreover, the stories within a common framework and language are educative for others in the community. The telling of stories is an act of inquiry.

In the stories from the focus group, four themes emerge in my analysis. As a framework, I locate the following themes between the call and the burden: stability, relationships, control, and culture/acclimation. My framework suggests that the themes themselves are

not necessarily burdens, unless they are, as Harden (1999) argues, from “prolonged exposure to intense emotional stress” and involve physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (p. 245). For example, in the theme of stability, it is the steady state of instability that pushes teachers toward burden. Likewise, in this pull and push between the call and the burden, in relationships and control, healthy relationships and a sense of control reinforce the call. In the theme culture/acclimation, stress occurs when a teacher remains on the periphery of the culture, such as a Teacher-On-Call or a teacher in surplus. Using the analogy of balance, it is optimal not to place too much weight on either side. For example, in the burnout literature, Harden (1999) points out that short-term stress can be a stimulating part of a profession (e.g. stress related to a deadline). On the other hand, in the case of compassion fatigue, a teacher’s call, and this pull toward the care for another, can lead to “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion or dissatisfaction with one’s work situation” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 12). In terms of balance, either a sacrificing commitment on one side, or an overload of stressors on the other (e.g. a lack of time) creates an imbalance.

It is important to identify pivotal themes in order to build a structure that frames the patterns in the stories, subjectivities, and realities. Given that the stories represent a snapshot, or the particulars of a complex context within teaching, the four themes themselves, though salient, are interrelated. For instance, a teacher designated as surplus crosses each theme to some degree. I use surplus as an example of *stability* because it stands out more prominently in giving meaning to the theme.



## THEMES

### **Stability (versus Instability)**

*Stability* is a theme that crosses several of the teacher stories. For a teacher in British Columbia, it is typical to begin a career as a Teacher-On-Call (TOC). In fact, in many urban districts, a teacher will spend several years in flux as a TOC before securing a full-time position. As such, financial instability, and day to day job instability, are realities for many TOCs. In my story, *I almost quit that first year*, I wrote about being called everyday to a different school, to teach a different grade, to teach a new subject with unfamiliar students, and to work with an unfamiliar staff. This story also highlights the financial instability and consequences related to being a TOC. I write, “Financially, I’m unable to refuse a teaching assignment. Although my expenses are below that of my university days, most months I find my salary below the Provincial poverty line. Monetary stress is taxing both mentally and physically.”

In the BCTF research report, “2008 Teachers Teaching On Call Working Conditions Survey,” Margaret White reports some startling statistics in British Columbia around TOC wages, the length of time on TOC lists, and the day-to-day work conditions for TOCs. Close to half of the 996 survey respondents reported spending one to three years as a TOC, with over one-fifth spending six or more years on the list. Three-quarters disclose an income of less than \$30,000 per year, with many carrying a student loan in excess of \$20,000. TOCs surveyed also expressed concerns about unwelcoming schools, a feeling of isolation, a lack of resources, challenges dealing with student behavior, and unsupportive administrators.

Job stability does not always come with a full-time teaching job. Being laid off or declared surplus is a common occurrence, especially for teachers early in their career. In the narrative, *I felt that I was not really cared for...*, Janine describes frustration at the lack of job stability, remarking, “It’s my life, and my job that is being played around with.” In my own story, *I was sent to the principal’s office*, I echo this frustration and comment on the emotions attached to such instability: “my initial feeling of uneasiness was answered with the news that I was being ‘surplused’ from the school at the end of the year. I was shocked. I was embarrassed. I was devastated.” In the stories of my study, four of the seven storytellers chose to tell a burnout story related to an experience as a TOC or surplused teacher. Job displacement is a reality for veteran teachers as well. Often, a teacher is required to teach a different grade or subject area each year, depending on the number of students in the school, the staffing allocations offered by the district, and/or the funding provided by the government. Just because a teacher has a grade for one year does not necessarily mean she will teach that grade in the next year.

Beginning and veteran teachers also encounter curriculum instability. It is common for schools, districts, and/or governments to change school initiatives and programs. As Sara explains, “My administrator wanted to bring a program into our school and it affected me directly.... Not once was I asked if I was up to participating in the program, yet I would be doing all the work.”

In this theme, burnout occurs when the balance leans towards instability. Thus, in my balance analogy, the weight shifts toward the burden. However, I would point out that the negative side of stability is when there is no movement toward change and new possibilities.

### **Relationships**

*Relationships* is a second theme which was constant throughout the literature and stories in my study. Maslach (1978) defines burnout as the “emotional exhaustion resulting from the stress of interpersonal contact” (p. 56). Seen in this way, negative relationships, especially those that persist over time, can be a direct cause of burnout. Taking this argument further, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, discussed in Chapter 2, establishes three factors of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Destructive relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and administrators touch on all three of these factors.

Teachers are involved with the care of children. As such, relationships are a huge part of the teaching profession. Usually the relationships with students are rewarding. In fact, many teachers enter the teaching field because they enjoy working with children. Sara explains why she became a teacher: “I love working with children. I thought I could make a positive influence in their lives.” Charlie echoes this sentiment saying, “I love children and feel that my positive outlook on life and learning are an inspiration to children and some staff which makes me feel good, too.” Unfortunately, sometimes the relationships with students are difficult. Charlie recalls a particularly unruly class, “By

the end of the day I did not get anywhere with them. No matter what I asked them to do, it was not happening. They were treating me as if I was their worst enemy.”

Relationships extend beyond the children in our classrooms. Teachers also have to negotiate and renegotiate the relationships with colleagues, parents, and administrators. Again, these relationships are often successful and rewarding interpersonal connections. However, at other times these relationships in the school can be frightening and destructive. In my story, *the staffroom was cold and uninviting*, I talk about difficult relations with my colleagues. In particular I talk about a feeling of separation. I write, “The absence of a supportive work environment made me feel dejected. I felt alone.” Andie relives a memory of a hostile colleague. She explains, “He was mad and he was out to get me.... He came storming into the room and literally yelled inches from my face. He just started giving it to me.”

Parents can also incite a hostile relationship. In the story, *I went and hid*, Chloe recalls a belligerent parent who was a constant threat. She tells us, “I would go out with him into another room and I would try to calm him down. But, it was getting more and more confrontational to the point that his fists were clenched and his shoulders were forward.” I also speak of an overly aggressive parent in my story, *her demeanor from the beginning was aggressive and confrontational*. In particular, I recount the feelings of devaluation after being criticized by an antagonistic parent: “After the meeting, I was physically and emotionally deflated. To be honest, I left that ridiculously long discussion with a felling

of inadequacy. I questioned my teaching knowledge, my teaching ability, and even my commitment to the students. I felt like shit.”

A teacher’s relationship with an administrator can also be a source of support or burden. In my years of teaching, I have been a part of many school communities. What I have come to believe is that administrators play a vital leadership role in creating an optimistic morale among staff and a positive school atmosphere. During the focus group session, Andie touches on this point during the discussion saying:

Last year we had a different administrator, she didn’t know how to communicate. This year we have a new principal and she communicates perfectly. It is a totally different school, totally different community. So I think the administrator is really the key. They model positive leadership and the staff picks up on it.

In my story, *my joy and enthusiasm eroded by the spring*, I talk about the hostile division that can arise between staff and administration. I write:

I hated staff meetings. As the principal tried to push her proposals on to the teachers, we pushed back as a collective group. Voices were often raised. Fingers were pointed. Blood pressures elevated. Instead of a supportive and collegial leadership, the school atmosphere felt more like a dictatorship, laden with blame and not praise.

Sara talks about the lack of understanding and empathy some administrators exude due to their lack of experience in a classroom. She explains:

...he [the administrator] has never even been a classroom teacher before. He has never taught primary before. He doesn’t have a clue. He has never once

congratulated any of the kids or anyone of the primary staff- telling them what a great job they are doing. And he uses this tactic, as I've seen it many times before. He divides and conquers the staff. That is how he operates.

### **Control (or Lack of)**

In this thesis, *control (or lack of)* is another theme that surfaces. In Chapter 2, the burnout literature indicates that stress can be a result of a lack of control in the workplace. In particular, the Job-Demands Resources Model and the Job-Strain Model, two current theoretical tools used to explain the process of burnout, propose that lack of control over job demands and job resources results in job stress. The two models also touch on job instability and a lack of supportive relationships between colleagues and supervisors, indicating that either can further contribute to job stress in the short term, and potentially burnout in the long-term.

In the stories, there are several examples of a lack of control within the classroom. In the narrative, *It was the only day I really cried*, Charlie talks about a class that felt a sense of authority, she says, "I was so surprised at how powerful they felt they were. And they were. And that was really disturbing for me." Emily discusses the lack of control over choosing the students in her class. In this particular case, Emily was new to the school and her new colleagues selected the student placement. She explains, "I had nineteen students: thirteen boys, six girls. It was a split class and the personalities in that class were dynamos." In my story, *I came into a hostile environment*, I also recollect a lack of control in the classroom, "I spent my first two weeks trying to get control of a class that

was used to running the show. They were a powerful group.... I quickly realized that if they couldn't do what they wanted, they would work as a group to get rid of any authority figure standing in their way." Part of not having control in these stories is a feeling of helplessness. In my case, I felt like whatever I did for that class was inadequate and unhelpful.

Similar to job instability discussed above, teacher displacement is another example of a lack of control. A TOC, for example, is moved to a different school and grade almost every call-out day. In my story, *moving to a new school is never easy...*, I remember my days as a dislocated TOC. I explain, "As a beginning teacher I was no stranger to moving schools. As a Teacher-On-Call you expect change. In effect that is your job. Every day you move to a different school, with a new staff, and a new class, and a new set of rules and procedures." When a teacher is laid off, or declared surplus, it is an additional decision out of the hands of the affected teacher. And, as Janine explains in her story, *I felt that I was not really cared for...*, "Just recently I was told that I was being designated surplus as the school is losing a division. I was told two seconds before the school staff meeting. I had no idea it was coming."

A critical question inside this theme is: who is in control? Generally in education, teachers do not make the executive decisions (e.g. policies, budgets, curriculum, and so on), even though we are the ones most affected. We are on the frontline. The stakeholders, many of whom have never been teachers themselves, are the puppeteers who pull the strings without an understanding of the consequences: for example, the

workload of a teacher in a split 6/7 classroom of thirty students, including three with special needs.

### **Culture/Acculturation**

Culture/Acculturation is a final theme that weaves in and out of this thesis. Acculturation is assimilation into a new culture. For teachers, it is important to become part of a school community to avoid feelings of isolation and a lack of professional identity. However, for beginning teachers, or displaced teachers, acculturation is often a difficult task since they are continually on the periphery. That is, displaced teachers, such as Teachers-On-Call, and teachers designated as surplus, never have the necessary time, control, or stability to form relationships with those in the school community. In my story, *I almost quit that first year...*, I touch on my lack of professional identity and the difficulties I had forming bonds with students and teachers as a TOC. I explain, “Often during my assignments I feel more like a babysitter than a teacher.... I am often greeted in the morning with cries of, ‘Ms. X is away, party!’ And staffrooms are often just as cold.” In the story, *It was the only day I really cried*, Charlie also talks about the inability to enter a school community. She describes a particular instance as a TOC in which she tries unsuccessfully to make a connection with a group of grade seven students: “I had done so many things – tried to open my heart to them, tried to share my time – and it was not getting anywhere at all.” In the end, Charlie felt that she could not assimilate into this type of environment. She explains:

This was a school where I just felt that I could not accept a future job. This was hard for me to accept because I was a person who felt so confident and capable...



I started feeling bad about myself because I had to say ‘no’ to a school where the children need so much.

Feelings of isolation can result when a teacher is unable to assimilate into a work culture. As a teacher recently designated as surplus, Janine remarks in her narrative, “It becomes my job to find a position and I feel nobody is really out there to help... at the end of the day, I really feel that I am on my own, up against so many people... Who looks after us?” In my story, *the staffroom was cold and uninviting...*, I also echo this feeling of isolation as a displaced teacher:

At recess, the staffroom was equally uninviting. I quickly realized that staff cliques had formed in the room, probably years before my arrival. Many of the groups talked loudly about their summer holidays. Sadly, I was not invited into their stories.

In the BCTF report on TOC working conditions (White, 2008), many respondents expressed concerns around the notion of acculturation. In particular, they reported feeling unwelcome in staffrooms, as well as feeling “invisible, unappreciated, and not knowing where to turn to for help” (p. 4). As a former TOC, I remember that sense of not being a part of a culture. In fact, I was not even a part of a culture of other TOCs – we were always on the move and rarely had an opportunity to come together as a group. Returning to the Maslach Burnout Inventory discussed in Chapter 2, reduced personal accomplishment – the reduction in feelings of competence and the perception of making

a meaningful contribution in their work – is a concern for those teachers on the fringe of the teaching culture. For those teachers, stress and burnout is a genuine possibility.

### **Coping**

When torn between two opposing forces, an individual must find ways to cope and bring balance. For teachers, in the tension zone between the call and the burden, discovering personal coping tactics is vital for professional survival. In Chapter 2, I introduced Brown and Uehara's (1999) research on coping practices for teachers. In particular, the authors argue for the importance of intervention programs aimed at equipping teachers with effective strategies for dealing with workplace stress. I believe that this type of coping knowledge and intervention is a critical element missing from the teaching profession. Specifically, I believe that professional development is not used to address the issues beneath teacher stress and burnout.

In the focus group session, part of our discussion revolved around professional development. A question I posed to the participants was, "Do you believe that there is adequate professional development around teacher stress and teacher burnout?" Every member answered emphatically: "No!" In fact, on a scale between one and five, one being "no professional development around issues related to stress, burnout, and coping," and five being "adequate professional development around issues related to stress, burnout and coping," each member indicated a one. It is a problem when professional development does not address and promote what Kyriacou (2001) describes as "healthy schools."

I contend that district initiatives related to professional development need to be reconsidered. That is, professional development should be used as a preventative and interventional source to help teachers cope with the prevalence of teacher stress and burnout. Specifically, I think professional development programs should inform practice and utilize research and experts in the field. At the very least, this teacher time should allow teachers to meet with each other to talk about personal coping strategies. Such a gathering of teachers can be invaluable. As Sara explains, “And so what you’re talking about [bonding with colleagues] would be the best professional development because we hear each other’s stories and that is what’s going to bring us together, that’s going to develop trust.”

In a way, such a gathering was part of the focus group session. Besides sharing stories around burnout, the group also talked about specific activities related to coping with burnout. All of the participants spoke of the importance of physical activity (e.g., walking, biking, and volleyball) in their dealing with workplace stress. Sara talks about the importance of walking and living in the moment. She explains, “Three to five evenings a week I’ll go out to the forest with my dog. And while I’m walking in the beauty I also ponder and think, and try to reclaim and remember why I went into teaching. Chloe talks about the importance of being physical to set the tone for the day, “I ride my bike to school every day. And that makes a huge difference because it sets me up physically for the day.”

Another way to cope with stress, that was discussed and recommended by several in the focus group, was the importance of travel. Janine reports, “I find travelling, even if it’s not somewhere on an airplane, just getting into a car and going for a drive somewhere, is relaxing.” Andie expands on the travelling strategy in talking about a special place to return to, “I travel to a family cottage. As soon as I get there, I just relax.”

For the majority of the focus group, the most important coping technique for dealing with workplace stress and burnout was interpersonal connections with family, friends, and colleagues. Many participants describe positive feelings and a fresh outlook after talking with close family. Janine explains:

Just knowing that I have somebody that I can talk to and share what I am feeling makes me feel better. That person may not be in the teaching profession, so they see it from a different perspective and can shed some light on a situation and make me feel better.

For other participants, including myself, connections with colleagues are beneficial to relieving workplace stress. In fact, sometimes the workplace bond with colleagues is the most critical interpersonal connection for dealing with teacher stress. As Charlie says, “Sometimes I feel my staff is my family as well.” Colleagues offer empathy, and advice, with regards to school related burdens. Sara talks about the importance of meeting with other teachers:

I meet three other friends who are teachers once a month for breakfast. And we just throw it all out, and we support each other and I know that they are a phone call away. I can't wait for that monthly breakfast because we really bare it out.

As well, teachers can share their secret workplace stories with colleagues and vent frustrations, while at the same time, creating bonds and a community of understanding and trust. Chloe explains:

There is a core group I know at my school and I thank God that I have them. I will just grab one of them in the hall and one way or another we have a way of getting it all out on the table and putting a situation right. There is humor attached to some of the stories and sometimes it is stuff that should never be recorded. You sometimes have to take the stories that are really eating at you and you have to put them somewhere safe. And, you need that safety in colleagues, and that's why I think team building in our profession is absolutely essential.

### **Implications and Last Thoughts**

In this final section, I would like to bring back the words of James Baldwin:

“The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling, is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side.”

## **Intimate Knowledge**

Baldwin speaks of an *intimate* knowledge. In this study, part of my intent was to introduce the intimate knowledge of teachers as expressed through their stories. While the literature on teacher stress and burnout in Chapter 2 surveys teacher knowledge, I submit it is not *intimate* teacher knowledge. In this thesis, what makes the knowledge around workplace stress and burnout intimate is the inclusion of secret stories. These stories embody expressions of emotions, thought, and interpretation. They carry a tone, language, and quality which consider inward experiences and show a vulnerable self, one that may be confused or frustrated. The storyteller is the protagonist, in a sense, with a particular understanding of the events and actions described. The stories embody trustworthiness. They are socially situated, and sometimes identify underlying assumptions on teaching.

In the focus group, we came together as seven colleagues, sharing private and firsthand experiences – our *Stories from the edge*. As colleagues, we negotiated meaning through the telling of stories, through the listening of stories, and through discussing the implications of our stories. Telling stories served as a means for breaking through the wall of isolation and self doubt into a space of “shared professional identity” (Hay & White, 2005). I am grateful for the teachers’ willingness to divulge their experiences and make them public as intimate knowledge.

## **The Price Paid**

Baldwin also refers to the price one pays in the pursuit of a calling. I ask, is the price teachers pay too heavy? In the current educational climate, steeped in cutbacks and escalating demands, I say “yes.” Teachers sacrifice too much. At the top of the list are issues around health, wellbeing and the balance between home and work life. When stressors are not within acceptable limits, beyond endurance, and accumulate and increase over time, the end results can be physical exhaustion, anxiety, and depression. Teachers experience a loss of concern, trust and spirit, as well as a reduced feeling of competence and personal accomplishment. A burned-out teacher loses her empathic engagement with students. On a purely economic level, there are large-scale costs related to absenteeism, teachers leaving their jobs, and teachers becoming disabled to work. On a smaller economic scale, teachers sacrifice their own money to buy curriculum resources due to a lack funding. Other sacrifices as a result of teacher burnout concern student outcomes and the potential for healthy schools. These three questions, posed by the storytellers, sum it up: “Is it worth the expense of my health? Are we cared for as educators? Who looks after us?” In short, the sacrifice is too high.

## **The Pursuit of the Calling and Its Ugly Side**

Baldwin’s words mirror my description of the zone of tension between the call and the burden, or the “ugly side.” In the following found poem, I string together the storyteller’s words and phrases in order to end this thesis with their voices.

## REFLECTIONS

walking into cold staffrooms  
guilt  
bursting into tears  
conflict  
enduring dejection and loneliness  
blame  
being embarrassed and devastated  
disrespect  
respect  
feeling empowered and appreciated  
connections  
playing a positive role in the lives of children  
bonds  
making a difference  
satisfaction  
sharing my heart



## **EPILOGUE**

**In the end,  
I make a difference...**

## THE ECHO OF THE CALLING

I recognized the face but I didn't know his name. He slowly approached. I thought he was going to make a sales pitch for a new credit card. He was young and dressed in a sharp business suit. Instead, he extended his hand and said, "Hello, Mr. Meyer."

I've been teaching for seven years. I've taught hundreds of students, many of whom have returned to my classroom for a visit. This was the first time a former student approached me as an adult. I felt old.

His name was "Jacob." He was a student in my first classroom – that class from hell. At the beginning of that year he was a difficult student; full of pre-teen attitude and prone to trouble. In fact, he was one of the students that stole the DJ's money after the school dance. But as he stood before me as an adult, I remembered Jacob's positive attributes – he was naturally bright and had a talent for writing. He was also the only student in the DJ heist that showed any sense of remorse.

I shook his hand.

What happened next was a surprise. What happened next reaffirmed my calling to be a teacher - he said "thank you."

To be honest, I wasn't sure why I deserved the gratitude. I thought I had failed Jacob, failed that entire class. I barely survived that year. The stress from teaching that group of students overwhelmed me and I struggled each and every day.

I wanted some details. Puzzled, I asked, "For what?"

Jacob told me a story. Through most of Jacob's elementary years he had a dislike for school. He lacked confidence and found class dull and tedious. This aversion and boredom often resulted in

misbehavior, both in and outside the classroom. But he reminded me of an English class seven years ago. Instead of a tired book report, or essay, Jacob was asked to just write. There was no minimum. There was no format. There was no letter grade. He was asked to just write.

Jacob was a music enthusiast. I remember discussing Pink Floyd and U2 songs with him after school. His writing assignment then turned into song. His passion for music, his feelings of pre-teen frustration, and his natural ability to write, came together on the page. His lyrics were poetic, full of raw and powerful emotions.

I was in awe of his writing. With his permission I submitted his work to a national writing competition. He didn't win. He didn't even get a response. But, as his story continued, he told me that he never forgot that English lesson, or my classroom. I was the first teacher to let him think outside the box. I was the first teacher that let him explore his passions. I was the first teacher that showed confidence in his abilities.

When his story ended I was left with a feeling of self-assurance. I do make a difference. Sometimes it is difficult to see the effects we have as educators, but we do make a difference in the lives of the children for whom we teach and care.

I extended my hand. It was my turn to say, "Thank you."

**Field Note: One Final Edit**

I read over my thesis one last time.

The statistics are bleak. The stories are emotional. The consequences are real. How do I want to end? How do I want my audience to feel?

Scared? Informed? Empowered?

Every teacher has "secret" stories from the edge. I believe that teachers can find balance and reside in the space between the call and the burden. It requires the action of those inside and outside education.

I read over my thesis one last time - the final piece is a story of "the ugly side." I delete it. I want my last words to end with a story of hope.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Ethics Approval



The University of British Columbia  
Office of Research Services  
**Behavioural Research Ethics Board**  
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,  
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL- MINIMAL RISK RENEWAL

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Carl Leggo	<b>DEPARTMENT:</b> UBC/Education/Language and Literacy Education	<b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b> H09-00569
<b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Site</b>	
N/A	N/A	
<b>Other locations where the research will be conducted:</b> The interviewer and subjects will be communicating via phone and email from their homes and schools. For focus group meetings, the subjects will choose a central location that is public but quiet. Examples may include a room in a community centre or a school classroom after school hours. For the individual meetings, the interviewer will choose a neutral location that is public but quiet.		
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b> Gregory Scott Meyer		
<b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b> N/A		
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> Exploring Teachers' Stories of Self-Care and Avoiding Burnout		

**EXPIRY DATE OF THIS APPROVAL: February 2, 2011**

**APPROVAL DATE: February 2, 2010**

The Annual Renewal for Study 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***

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

### **Letter of Initial Contact**

My name is Gregory Scott Meyer and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting entitled, **Exploring Teachers' Stories of Self-Care and Avoiding Burnout**. The data from this research study will be used for the purpose of writing my thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Masters Degree in Education from the University of British Columbia.

I have been teaching in the North Vancouver School District for seven years. In that time I have come to understand the many stresses that teachers face on a daily basis. In my own teaching, I have experienced numerous instances of stress and burnout. What is more, many of my colleagues have also expressed similar feelings of extreme strain or burnout in their professional careers.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore qualitatively practicing teachers' experiences and stories related to their own self-care and avoidance of burnout in their practices. The study will elicit:

- A) Teachers' stories that identify instances of stress that have lead to extreme strain or burnout.
- B) Teachers' experiences related to beneficial professional development (i.e. professional development workshops, school-based activities, etc.).
- C) Teachers' personal activities and strategies that help them deal with the stresses they encounter as teachers.

The research involves participation in two 90-minute focus group sessions and one 45-minute follow-up individual interview. All meeting will be audiotapes and transcribed. Any subject who requests access to their own interview data will be given a copy of the transcript. Subjects who would like access to the compilation and overview of the anonymous summary study will be given either a copy of the thesis or the data used to write the thesis specific to the interviews.

The two focus group sessions will offer an opportunity for each candidate to share stories around instances of teacher stress or burnout in their own practice. In addition, subjects will be asked to describe experiences of beneficial professional development and personal activities that help them deal with teacher stress and burnout.

The individual interview will offer an opportunity for the co-investigator and the subject to elaborate on and clarify the stories and experiences that developed in the two initial focus group sessions.

The total amount of time required for participation in the study will be approximately 3 hours and 45 minutes. Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without reason or consequence. All data will be kept confidential and computer files will be password protected. Each participant will have a pseudonym and transcripts will be coded to ensure confidentiality.

In the two focus group meetings, the identity of the participants will only be revealed to the extent that each individual wishes to introduce her or himself. For example, participants may choose to use a pseudonym. Participants will be asked, as well, not to refer by name to clients or others during their discussions. Participants will also be asked to not make reference to what is discussed during focus group meetings outside of the meetings.

If you have any questions about the rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line at the University of British Columbia's Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598. If you wish further information or clarification, please phone me at (604) 607-5475 or email me at [gmeyer@nvsd44.bc.ca](mailto:gmeyer@nvsd44.bc.ca).

If you are willing to participate in this research study, please phone or email me or indicate your response on the form provide and mail it in the enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelope by (1 week –date of response). Please keep one copy of the form for yourself.

My research supervisor is Dr. Carl Leggo, Professor, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of British Columbia. He can be contacted at (604) 822-4640 or by email at [carl.leggo@ubc.ca](mailto:carl.leggo@ubc.ca). Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Gregory Scott Meyer

**Research Project:  
Exploring Teachers' Stories of Self-Care and Avoiding Burnout**

Yes, I am interested in participating in the research project described in your letter of initial contact. Please contact me at:

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so that we can arrange a meeting time and place:

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Signature

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Date

**Consent Form**  
**Exploring Teachers' Stories of Self-Care and Avoiding Burnout**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Carl Leggo, Department of Language and Literacy Education, (604) 822-4640

**Co-Investigator:** Gregory Scott Meyer, Faculty of Education, Graduate Student, (604) 607-5475; The data for this research project will be used for the purpose of writing my thesis in fulfillment of the requirements for a Masters Degree in Education from the University of British Columbia.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to explore qualitatively practicing teachers' experiences and stories related to their own self-care and avoidance of burnout in their practices. The study will elicit:

- A) Teachers' stories that identify instances of stress that have lead to extreme strain or burnout.
- B) Teachers' experiences related to beneficial professional development (i.e. professional development workshops, school-based activities, etc.).
- C) Teachers' personal activities and strategies that help them deal with the stresses they deal with as teachers.

**Study Procedures:**

The subjects for this study will consist of a focus group of six teachers from across the Lower Mainland. At least four candidates will teach in the elementary school system while at least one candidate will teach in a high school setting. In addition, the focus group will include both male and female educators with various years of teaching experience. The first six volunteer candidates to meet the criteria will be invited and included in the study.

Each candidate will be asked to dedicate 3 hours and 45 minutes to the project. All six candidates will meet for two focus group sessions that will last approximately 90 minutes

each. In addition, the candidates will be asked to participate in one individual follow-up interview that will last approximately 45 minutes.

**Potential Risks:**

There are no risks associated with participating in this study. All interviews will be psychologically non-invasive and non-judgmental.

**Potential Benefits:**

In this study, the process of teacher collaboration is potentially beneficial to you as it can provide a sense of support and care around issues of teacher stress/burnout and teacher well-being. Further, you may discover useful professional development sources from other subjects as well as personal stress coping strategies.

**Study Withdrawal:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time, without providing any reasons for your withdrawal.

**Confidentiality:**

Your confidentiality will be respected. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent to the disclosure. Each participant will have a pseudonym and transcripts will be coded to ensure confidentiality. During the focus groups, participants will also be asked not to make reference to what is discussed during focus group meetings outside of the meetings. All documents, transcripts, and data recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. As well, the data, both audio and transcribed text, to be stored on a computer that will password protected and the files will only be accessible to the computer's administrator (Gregory Scott Meyer).

**Contact for information about the study:**

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, please contact the co-investigator, Gregory Scott Meyer, at (604) 607-5475.

If you have any questions about the rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line at the University of British Columbia's Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.

**Subject Consent:**

You understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that you may refuse to participate or you may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

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Subject Signature Date

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Printed Name of the Subject