

Marisa's Induction: A Life History Study of a New Teacher

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Concerns about teacher retention during the first five years of practice have prompted many teacher educators, educational researchers, and administrators to pay attention to the needs of new teachers (Moir & Gless, 2001). Yet many new teachers are successful during these induction years. Developing a better understanding of the qualities and experiences that contribute to their success seems vital to enhancing teacher education and induction .

Stories of individual teachers help illustrate the complexities of teaching. They reveal that “being a teacher involves much more than simply mastering a set of skills” (Muchmore, 2001, p. 107). Effective teachers are able to integrate their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), theories and practices learned in initial teacher education programs, and their experiences working in classrooms and schools. In-depth life histories help teachers better appreciate the multi-dimensionality of teacher identity and experiences. These stories can serve as “tools for self-reflection” (Muchmore, 2001, p. 105) and models for professional growth. For those charged with the initial education and ongoing development of teachers, the stories of teachers can provide a basis for re-visioning instruction and programs to better meet the needs of new teachers. For teachers and scholars alike, puzzling over the stories of successful teachers can lead to deeper understandings of what it means to become an effective practitioner.

Meeting the Challenge

(Based on Field Notes and Interview, January 18, 2007)

Marisa had been looking forward to her third year of teaching Oakdale Public School!

Oakdale is situated beside a large cluster of modest high-rise buildings. Most of the students are immigrants, or the children of recent immigrants. There are large clusters of immigrants from Central Asia, the Horn of Africa, and Eastern Europe. There are significant numbers for whom English is a second language. Also, there is a relatively high special education population. In the Ontario standardized literacy tests...

Marisa had settled in nicely at Oakdale Public School and was looking forward to teaching the Grade 5 curriculum again. While she was pleased with her teaching, Marisa saw many ways in which she could improve the program to better meet the needs of her students. She was excited by the opportunity to collaborate in planning and teaching collaboratively with women who had been her informal mentor since she began teaching:

We met a few times in August. We were really proud of the literacy plan we developed. We couldn't wait to get it into place! And our school had just started Tribes, a cooperative learning strategy. And we were excited about that. We were starting to implement all our literacy and Tribes plans. And then, in October, we lost a teacher [due to low enrolment] and a lot of change happened. My Grade 5 class became a Grade 4-5 class. I lost students and I gained students.

"It was a really hard transition for both me and my students," Marisa continued. Everything she had planned "went out the window" as she dealt with the challenges of a new class and, particularly, the experience of teaching a split grade for the first time.

This experience was particularly frustrating because Marisa was a dedicated practitioner. In curricular terms, she now had to develop courses for two grades, taught simultaneously. The new Science and Social Studies units, in particular, made it a difficult term. Marisa was also concerned that she now had only six weeks to assess them for report cards. Adding considerably to the challenge was the fact that "the students she was receiving were behaviourally and academically very low. The majority of students were members of visible minorities; many had second language issues though only one was formally identified as ESL. Over half the class was identified as exceptional, seven of whom spent significant time with the special education resource teacher. Recalling the switch, and students' adjustments to it, Marisa said, "The community I had worked so hard to build in September was broken in October".

Since then, she had been working hard to rebuild that sense of community. When interviewed in January, Marisa was "starting to see improvement, though there are still areas on which I need to work." She was particularly pleased to see old and new students working together in an inclusive manner.

Developing social skills and building community are important goals for Marisa. In the literacy unit she had developed collaboratively over the summer:

[T]he books we had chosen to do read-alouds with were all about building community. It taught about families, different roles, boys versus girls, and similar issues that often arose in class. And, if you look at our "Community Is..." chart, every time we read a books we would talk about what we can learn about building community. And kids brainstormed things like "friends support each other", "everyone is equal regardless of the colour of their skin" etc.

It was clear to us as researchers, however, that Marisa had managed to build a strong sense of community despite these challenges. Clare was struck by the "relational"

character of the class dynamics. She noted the “democratic procedures”, “opportunities for student input”, high level of collaboration, and the genuine sense of engagement and enjoyment Marisa demonstrated in her interactions with students. Julian noted that “students are almost always learning in community—in circle, in pairs, and in groups.”

Marisa aligned community building with the development of classroom routines. Routines, like sitting in a circle, showing appreciation and working in groups, were critical to “that sense of community and to building social skills.” Julian observed that “all the routines stress the importance of community,” as did her classroom management.

These routines and the sense of community were linked, in Marisa’s mind, to learning. Indeed, given the additional challenges the inner-city children of immigrants often faced, these established a foundation that supported the development of literacy, numeracy and other academic skills. Clare wrote that “learning is central to this class,” and the learning is adapted to the needs of each student and to the larger literacy unit. Clare also noted the “incredible amount of work done in one period” and that “the students were obviously used to working through such full lessons.” Julian highlighted the careful “building of conceptual understandings” and “the modeling of disciplinary practices.” Describing the literacy lesson, Clare concluded that it “must have taken ages to plan this one lesson.”

Marisa (a pseudonym) stood out as a highly capable and conscientious new teacher with the ability to negotiate the complexities of teaching in order to meet the needs of her students. In this paper, we consider how Marisa’s classroom practice was informed by her personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), teacher education program, and her first two years of teaching.

This life history of Marisa is part of an ongoing longitudinal study that followed graduates of a large school of education. This paper, written at the end of the fourth year of the project, draws on reflective writing by Marisa during her teacher education program, as well as interviews and classroom observations made during her first three years as a classroom teacher. Our exploration of Marisa’s life history is framed by understandings developed in this wider project.

1. Theoretical Framework

The induction of new teachers has been identified as a priority due to shortages in qualified teachers (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2001). Among the main reasons for shortages are attrition rates among new teachers that range from 35 to 50 percent in the United States during the first five years (Stoel & Thant, 2002)).

Recent initiatives by the National Academy of Education (Darling-Hammond & Bradford, 2005) and the American Educational Research Association (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005) have attempted to identify best practices in teacher education in order to make it less fragmented and more cohesive. The main focus of our funded research project is to identify ways of enhancing teacher education so that new teachers are better prepared to confront the challenges of teaching in diverse classrooms.

More recently, we have taken a greater interest in the dynamics faced by new teachers once they enter the classroom. The initial years are important “in that early experiences serve to set the professional norms, attitudes, and standards that will guide practice over the course of a career” (Moir & Gless, 2001, p. 109). As a result, school districts have become increasingly interested in developing effective teacher induction and mentoring systems (Moir & Bloom, 2003). Most of the teachers in our research project were involved in pilot or *ad hoc* induction programs; local school districts will be required to begin formal induction programs in 2006-2007.

Life history is one approach to understanding the experiences of teachers (Smith, 2001). Extended life histories (e.g. Muchmore, 2004) provide understandings of how teachers draw on their life experiences in order to live fulfilled careers. Other life histories (e.g. Bullough & Baughman, 1997) demonstrate how promising teachers can encounter dissatisfactions that cause them to exit the profession. Life histories of novice

teachers (e.g. Beck-Frezier, 2005) convey the complex interplay of personal experiences, teacher education, and classroom experiences in decision-making during these crucial years.

Studying the progress of Marisa, a new teacher who demonstrated considerable success in her first two years of teaching, helps us better understanding the qualities that make for successful transitions to teaching. How did she draw on her personal experiences, her teacher education program, and supports provided at school?

2. Methodology and Data Sources

This life history study is part of a four-year longitudinal study of the preparation and subsequent development of a sample of elementary teachers. In the first year, a sample of preservice instructors and their students in several elementary programs at a large college of education were interviewed. Marisa was not one of these students, but the findings from the larger study help frame her story.

In the next two years, we followed graduates of the programs (22 in year one, 20 in year two) into their first two years of teaching, each year interviewing and observing them in their classrooms. One-hour interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The same questions were asked of all interviewees, but further probe questions were asked and supplementary comments were encouraged. Some questions were modified each year to reflect changing time perspective. Interviewers observed a language arts lesson and, often, other lessons for an hour to half-a-day. Observations were guided by a classroom observation protocol that identified look-fors and areas for further reflection.

Our approach was qualitative, as defined by Punch (2005). We had a relatively small sample of teachers whom we studied in depth; our interviews were largely open-ended; and themes emerged as the study progressed. In analyzing the transcripts and observation notes, we identified themes or “codes” related to the central issues of the study. This has led to several papers examining themes concerning teacher education and teacher induction.

This life history study of Marisa, utilizes ethnographic (Van Maanen, 1988) and narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) methods to examine how Marisa’s life experiences contributed to her success during the first two years of practice. Marisa’s practice was regarded as exemplary by researchers, administrators and colleagues. Interviews and observations were conducted in the school (Wolcott, 1995) during her first two years of teaching. Transcripts record her beliefs, perceptions and experiences during her two-year teacher education program and first two years of teaching. The observation notes convey her approach to classroom teaching and learning. These sources were supplemented by reflective writings Marisa prepared during her teacher education program: journals and reflections on field experiences. There is much evidence that such an approach brings alive the voices of teachers and better conveys the complexity of their experiences (Muchmore, 2001).

3. Evidence/Results

We have identified six key themes that emerged from our analysis of our research with Marisa, as well as general patterns from the larger study. Marisa’s reflections during

her two-year masters in education are interwoven with interview transcripts and classroom observations. The themes below illustrate our approach, evidence, and results.

Building Community

Building community is at the heart of Marisa's conception of teaching. In developing a literacy plan over the summer, Marisa and her colleague had linked literacy to *Tribes*, a cooperative learning approach focussed on the development of respectful classroom communities. Community building also figured prominently in the selection of "read-aloud" texts. The "Community Is..." chart attests to the importance of community as a subject of discourse in the classroom.

Marisa's decision to become a teacher was "grounded in a strong belief in the role teachers and schools can play in fostering a sense of community amongst their students" (M.A. Reflection). She adds,

My experiences as the daughter of immigrant, working class parents fostered a desire to help children in similar circumstances find this sense of community. Working with visible minorities, new immigrants and economically disadvantaged children furthered my resolve to make my students conscious of class, culture, ethnicity, and gender issues. In short, my desire to teach is rooted in a desire to foster tolerance, a sense of self, and a sense of community within my students. (M.A. Reflection)

In her M.A. reflection, Marisa drew attention to the continuity between her childhood experiences as her subsequent desire to become a teacher. After reading an earlier version of this paper, however, she revealed a more complex interplay between formative experiences and her conception of classroom community. While Marisa's

background contributed to her empathy for immigrant, working class students, she also regarded her upbringing as culturally and religiously homogeneous as “most of my classmates and teachers were Italian like me” (Email, April 1, 2007). A critical incident (Tripp, ???) helped Marisa formulate a new conception of community:

Although this helped to build a sense of community, in high school and university I quickly began to realize that this isolation can also build ignorance and therefore intolerance. My own ignorance became apparent to me during my experiences in university. I met and became friends with people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I did my practicum placements [in Early Childhood Education degree program] in a variety of settings (daycares, family literacy centers, schools, community intervention projects) and met families from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. My most profound experience was working in a prevention and early intervention program located in an inner-city community. It was here that I learned just how ignorant I was about the issues facing new immigrants today. You see, while my own parents were also hard-working immigrants who struggled to make a life for themselves in Canada, they had at least two things working in their favour: they did not emigrate from a war-torn country and they were white, which made their transition easier. Ignorance breeds fear. It was after I was welcomed into the homes of the families in [the inner-city] community that I realized that I started my placement with a lot of underlying fear—fear of working with a community that was quite different than my own.

Overall, I think this is why I chose to work with the public school board rather than the Catholic one. I wanted to work with students and teachers from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. I think that it presents a wonderful opportunity to build a sense of tolerance and understanding within my students (and among teachers). (Email, April 1, 2007)

Commitment to Diversity, Tolerance and Social Justice

While Marisa’s experience working in a diverse inner-city neighbourhood reinforced the importance of community, it profoundly altered her sense of the type of community she wished to foster. Her commitment was now to the development of heterogeneous communities of diversity, tolerance and social justice.

This theme was evident in Marisa’s curriculum choices and classroom culture. For a Grade 5 language arts lesson, Marisa read from a story of a homeless and hungry

Afghani girl weighing whether or not she should steal eggs. The discussion of point of view that followed was sensitive to ethical issues and to the perspectives of all the characters. (Field Notes, June 8, 2006)

When asked why she selected this read-aloud story, Marisa recalled why she had previously chosen another novel by the same author:

I read it to them in the first term because we were studying Canadian government and rights and responsibilities...I wanted to make a link with government and how the people living in Afghanistan at the time of the Taliban did not have the same rights that we enjoy in Canada. And I also have a group of students that are from Muslim countries—and one from Afghanistan—who can relate to the character a lot in terms of, you know, the clothing she wore, her religion; it comes up a lot...And then they just loved the first one. (Interview, June 8, 2006).

This sense of community and justice was also evident the previous year in her Grade 4 class at the same school. The class was “structured, open, friendly, respectful” with well established rituals and routines. For example, a class meeting was held “with all students sitting on the floor boy/girl, boy/girl. The meeting began and ended with the turning of a ‘rainstick’” (Field Notes, January 28, 2005).

A commitment to social justice added a sense of urgency to Marisa’s work, one that drove her program planning and classroom routines. She was very aware of where her students stood in relation to those from more privileged backgrounds. She recalled a practicum placement working with students from affluent backgrounds, who were more advanced in their literacy: “Those kids regularly go to the library, regularly buy books at the bookstore, go to speaking engagement with authors...So they have been immersed in

that, as well as going to an amazing school” (Interview, January 17, 2007). In comparison, her current students are disadvantaged in terms of learning opportunities. In addition, “other issues at home” can impede learning (Interview, January 17, 2007). As a result, Marisa’s current students “really do need extra support and structure”, and she is committed to making the best use of the limited time available during the school day.

In Loco Parentis

While Marisa was committed collaborative and democratic principles in the classroom, she always felt a profound sense of responsibility for fostering and sustaining the classroom community she envisioned.

“The teacher’s role in the class can be understood through the ideals reflected in the doctrine *in loco parentis*,” wrote Marisa during her teacher education studies (M. A. Reflection). This conception caused Marissa to believe that “teachers are responsible for the emotional, social and mental well-being of their students, in addition to being responsible for students’ academic achievement” (M.A. Reflection). This, she continued, “lay at the heart of my desire to teach”. While she embraced the challenge, she also worried that too much of a burden was being placed on the shoulders of teachers.

In loco parentis, first and foremost, involves creating a safe learning environment for students. Classroom management was not identified as a major concern in Marisa’s preservice teaching reflections. Instead of focussing on the mundane issues of behaviour management, she concentrated on developing activities that would be meaningful to individual students and the class as a whole. Nonetheless, she recognized the importance

of routines in ensuring that she could cover the wide range of learning expectations for her class.

Given the time constraints in classrooms, it is crucial that teachers are able to effectively manage transitions and establish familiar routines. Marisa demonstrated these skills throughout her first two years. In her fifth month of teaching, field notes reveal that that “structured, open, friendly, respectful rituals were in place” (Field Notes, January 28, 2005). Clear daily and weekly routines made it possible to balance independent, pair, group, centres, and whole class activities while covering a host of subjects over a school day. At the end of that day, “a class meeting was held for fifteen minutes with all students sitting on the floor boy/girl, boy/girl. The meeting began and ended with the turning of a ‘rainstick’” (Field Notes, January 28, 2005).

Marisa clearly regarded classroom management as embedded in daily routines and meaningful learning activities. This is illustrated by this comment regarding the routines for guided reading:

My kids have definite expectations about when I’m working with a guided reading group. They know they cannot disturb me or ask any questions. They know that they have to have all their materials with them at the centre. They know where everything is in the classroom and try to minimize interruptions. I have the rotations posted and they know what to expect. At each table a task sheet helps them work step-by-step through the activity. They also know there is something extra to do if they finish the centre early. (Interview, February 14, 2006)

Marisa said that they “know” how to behave, but it might be more accurate to say that she taught them these routines over the first few months of the course. It is also clear from this description that the procedures for each centre were carefully planned to ensure that they would flow effectively. After observing a very well structured set of language arts lessons, a researcher noted that Marisa was always aware of the clock and never wasted

time. Activities were thoughtfully integrated, materials were handy, and everything was very tidy. More importantly, it appeared that this was “a community of learners focussed on the tasks that were carefully designed to engage them. Moreover, students are seen as learners constructing knowledge from their shared study of the topic. They were enthusiastic, and appeared happy with the teacher and each other” (Field Notes, June 8, 2006).

Effective Classroom Routines

A moment of crisis during Marisa’s second teacher education year occurred when a friend who was a first year teacher expressed regrets about teaching elementary school.

Marisa writes:

Wearing so many hats, so to speak, has drained her...She is not just a teacher; she is also a child psychologist, family therapist, curriculum experts, and health care worker, among others. On top of this she is accountable to all 56 of her students (she teaches two kindergarten classes), to 112 parents, other teachers in the school, her principal, the provincial government, and society in general. Most importantly, she is accountable to herself and the values and principles she acquired as a program grad. (M.A. Reflection)

Despite these anxieties, Marisa embraced the responsibility of being *in loco parentis*. At the same time, she added, “we need the cooperation and support” of others in order to avoid feeling “overwhelmed and demoralized” (M.A. Reflection).

Beginning teaching was challenging for Marisa. She had a deep understanding of teaching and learning as complex dynamics, so it was often difficult to find resources and

plan in a manner consistent with her philosophy and principles. While textbooks and teacher's manuals were helpful in her first year of teaching, Marissa found it necessary to prepare her own materials and select her own guided reading texts. (Interview, January 2005)

Referring to her teacher education program, Marisa indicated that she would like "planning on a more practical level and not in an idealistic way. Giving us, for example a real life teacher's schedule, and okay, now create your literacy program based on those gaps" (Interview, February 14, 2006). While she entered the profession with "lots of goals", it was "my first year of teaching that really taught me the importance of routines" (Interview, January 17, 2007). She continued:

Even though I knew theoretically how important they were to establish, it is very different once you have your own class. I came to a school where routines were very important...There were routines for assembly, line-ups, everything...I remember at the beginning thinking it's very rigid, and was always afraid of being too lenient...I remember my principal saying, "You are not their mother. You are their teacher.... Don't be afraid to use a firm tone of voice...Set high expectations for them. And if you set those high expectations, they will succeed." (Interview, January 17, 2007)

By the end of her second year, Marisa felt better organized. Her solution to the challenges of too many expectations was to better integrate her program. Marissa said:

This year I've been better at linking reading and writing so that I pick my writing form first...then build my guided reading around that. So, for example, we focussed on newspapers this term and they were going to be eventually writing a

newspaper article. But before we did a lot of reading of...different newspaper articles and analyzing them. (Interview, June 8, 2006).

While organizational issues were of great concern, researchers noted that Marisa employed class time very well: “Students moved very quickly from activity to activity, with little transition. Students knew how to shift well from one task to another.” On the same day, all the instructional segments were between five and twenty minutes in length. “Students were very eager and engaged,” the researcher wrote, “There was some talk out of turn but it tended to be on topic and as a result of engagement.” (Field Notes, June 8, 2006).

Perhaps most significant was her philosophical understanding of the problem: “I’m trying to get better at just not feeling that I need to cover everything but really focus on the important things” (Interview, June 8, 2006).

Program Planning: A Complex Process

One of the qualities that distinguished Marisa among our research participants was her complex understanding of program planning. From the beginning, she had a clear vision of education that recognized complex interrelationships among students, curriculum, assessment, and social context. As a teacher, Marisa felt called upon to balance these so that improving individual student learning was always front-and-centre.

In her preservice teacher education program, Marisa was attracted to child-centred philosophies yet reticent to fully embrace a constructivist approach to education. She identified structure as critical to ensuring that the learning activities were educationally meaningful and effectively assessed for learning. This caused her to be attracted to

literacy resources that balanced independent play with teacher-directed activities and explicit reading and writing instruction (M.A. Paper). Yet, her intent was clearly constructive during these years. For example, in teaching the qualities of light, she was very interested in constructing specific learning activities that reflected student abilities and helped develop genuine understanding of “abstract concepts regarding light and shadows” (M.A. Paper). When interviewing a student about his understanding of light, Marisa would “provide concrete examples of the more abstract ideas that he had trouble understanding. This was accomplished through the use of diagrams, videos, and pictures, or by having him make a model of the relationship between light and shadow” (M.A. Paper). Similarly, she was committed to the use of manipulables and journals in mathematics for the opportunities they afforded for students to share their mathematical understandings.

Marisa understood that that meaningful student learning was the measure of an effective teacher. As a preservice teacher, she recognized that concrete instructional and assessment strategies were necessary to support and enhance individual learning. She was committed to meeting course expectations, yet always recognized that individual growth not the achievement of curriculum expectations was critical to effective education.

The preservice teacher education, however, did not help her in planning how to achieve this balance. Marisa expressed the view that:

Preservice sometimes was based on the ideal classroom, and we had an assignment planning a timetable for that. But it wasn't based on an actual timetable from an actual realistic teacher's classroom and experiences of what

their timetable was...I don't think it really prepared us to deal with it in a more practical sense. (Interview, ????)

Looking back at her preservice program, Marisa expressed tensions between different dimensions of program planning. She said that her program really helped her “think about how to integrate literacy with other curriculum areas like math” (Interview, ???). On the other hand, she desired more emphasis on structured program planning: “structure helps, especially in the first year, because you know what to do and you don't feel you're picking things out of thin air” (Interview, ???). She did not want rigid procedures that did not take into account the individual and collective needs of students in her particular school context. Instead, she sought strategies for negotiating complexity that would help her to plan for her unique classroom setting. She recalled:

[T]here was a large focus on centres [in preservice]; but it's so hard to do and it's just so time-consuming and there's so much work involved...It's overwhelming at first to get started because it takes so much time to get the task cards ready and actually think of activities. (Interview, ???)

She recognized that mastering centres as a classroom strategy involved complex understandings, not simply procedural knowledge. This complex understanding of program planning is reinforced in other comments Marisa made about her preservice experiences. For example, she wished that the preservice program had taught her “more about choosing levelled books, books that are just right for the kids. And more actual reading strategies” (Interview, ???)

Marisa also indicated that she would have benefited from more assistance from her instructors on how to prioritize curriculum expectations. Too often she found her self

using a trial-and-error process that she found imperfect. When asked about the development of her teaching skills during her first two years of teaching, Marisa said, “I am very proud of what I’ve done, but I feel that when I am doing something really, really well, everything else is falling apart for those three weeks. For example, if I’m doing really well in literacy, math may not be going so well” (Interview, June 8, 2006). Looking forward, she then expressed hope that she would be better able to juggle these challenges in subsequent years.

When asked where she developed effective strategies for program planning, particularly in literacy, Marisa highlighted the support of her “literacy-focussed” principal and her mentor, both of whom provided her with great strategies (Interview, January 17, 2007). Regarding her mentor, Marisa added:

I think we kind of inspire each other. She teachers me a lot and I think I inspire her because I come into it very idealistic...She grounds me. So we find that happy medium because she’s just as idealistic and she’s been teaching a bit longer. She is more realistic and says, “Okay, this isn’t realistic; we need to slow down a little bit!” (Interview, January 17, 2007)

One of the main challenges for Marisa in her first years in the classroom was to teach in a manner consistent with her complex understanding and core values. This requires long-range planning, something which is not easy to develop in one’s first year of teaching. Marisa wrote in her first year, “Long-range planning is probably my biggest challenge” (Interview, January 28, 2005). By the end of the second year, she was becoming more comfortable with planning. She reported that she “envisioned my weeks as six-week blocks” and would attempt during that time to balance different dimensions

of the program (Interview, June 8, 2006). Also, as was evident in the field notes (June 8, 2006), the planned activities integrated reading, writing, speaking, word study and critical analysis. She also made adaptations along the way to better meet the student needs she identified. For example, Marisa reduced guided reading time because it caused her writing program to suffer (Interview, June 8, 2006). In addition, she made genuine efforts to integrate social studies with the themes of the language arts reading and writing program. Marisa understood that integrating curriculum and adapting it to the differentiated learning needs of her students were difficult tasks, yet she set very high standards for herself.

By her third year, Marisa had developed a stronger sense of perspective regarding curriculum planning. She said:

I think I am starting to learn that, as someone once told me, there is no curriculum police, and no one is really going to know if I taught all of the expectations [from the official curriculum] And, really, it's unrealistic to assume, especially in the content area, that you can possibly cover everything. And why would you want to? (Interview, January 17, 2007)

She recognized that, in terms of facts, "things come up in other grades." As a result, she has chosen to focus on "the bigger skills and concepts that are important" In selecting which expectations to cover, she considers which are most relevant and which her students "will be successful in". In Science, for example, she is focusing "on making observations and predictions; all of the inquiry skills". "So I think I am getting better at picking and choosing." (Interview, January 17, 2007)

This perspective

Teaching Language Arts

Marisa's complex sense of program planning is evident in her approach to Language Arts. As literacy teaching has been the focus of our research project, we have had many opportunities to observe Marisa teach Language Arts and listen to her discuss her program.

This commitment to a whole language program, combined with the flexibility and structure was evident in a teacher education paper she wrote on kindergarten literacy programs. On the one hand, she found phonics to be a "systematic, rigid approach" that relied on worksheets and flashcards. On the other hand, while she was drawn to the whole language approach, she was concerned that possessed neither flexibility nor structure necessary for literacy acquisition. "Letter knowledge, phonemic awareness and letter sound recognition" are crucial concepts that need to be "reinforced through a systemic approach" (M.A. Paper). Balanced literacy approaches, in her view, was a good middle ground because its "play-disguised-as-work activities" (M.A. Paper) involved both authentic literacy tasks and strategies for literacy learning. Marisa concluded the paper by suggesting that teachers "critically examine each program and approach, taking into consideration the research on early literacy, the unique learning needs of the children in their class, as well as their own beliefs about learning and child development" (M.A. Paper).

As a classroom teacher, Marisa demonstrated a complex understanding of literacy teaching. The richness of the literacy environment was evident upon walking into the room. Words are everywhere: a vocabulary chart, plastic tubs filled with books, word

cards on items such as staplers and doors, printed rules for writing, writing activities on the board, and debating points on chart paper. (Field Notes, February 14, 2006).

Observing Marisa's class, it was evident that she was attempting to adopt a whole language approach while developing specific literacy skills in a systematic manner. In addition, it was evident that Marisa was attempting to teach reading, writing and word study in an integrated manner.

While Marisa drew on available literacy resources, she very much adapted her language arts curriculum to her own beliefs about literacy and the interests of her students. For example, she selected *The Breadwinner*, a novel set in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, for a first-term novel study "because we were studying about Canadian government, and rights and responsibilities". The main reasons for the selection were that a significant number of students were Muslims "who can relate to the character a lot", and the topic of Islam often comes up among students and needed to be discussed thoughtfully in class. As this novel was very popular among students. Marisa was persuaded to teach the sequel, *Parvana's Journey* later in the year. (Interview, June 8, 2006). Marisa, in teaching the novel, had clear expectations for each lesson. For example, one lesson focussed on understanding point of view. The concept of point of view, which was introduced as part of the writing program, was reviewed before beginning the day's chapter. Then, students were engaged in a jigsaw activity to consider different points of view. First, homogenous expert groups were formed to discuss the points of view of individual characters. Then heterogeneous groups met to discuss differing points of view on the incident presented in the chapter. Afterwards, the whole class met to debrief. Each activity was carefully timed and routines were followed effortlessly. The story and the

activities arose from the interests of the students, yet Marisa had clear expectations for skill development during the lesson. More importantly, these expectations were linked to a larger plan for language arts learning. (Field Notes, June 8, 2006)

Marisa's priority was "to focus on the reading-writing connection". This priority was evident in the relative priority she attached to specific literacy objectives. For example, she unapologetically described her word study program as "not the greatest".

She explained:

I am trying to focus a lot more on reading and writing strategies. In particular, we are looking at main ideas, as well as form and structure. In the end, if spelling is poor, there are ways of getting around it. However, if they cannot read well, especially in the senior grades, they are really going to fall behind. Word study is not as important as reading and writing. (Interview, June 8, 2006)

The priority attached to the development of higher-level literacy skills, evident in the point of view exercise, was particularly strong the study of fact, opinion and bias in newspaper stories. For example, over four days, they looked at different features of an article on cell phone use.

By the end of it, we started reading with a critical lens...We realized that the author was trying to convince us that cell phones have improved our lives. Should we believe him? So in pairs we brainstormed all the reasons why cell phones improved our lives and all the reasons they haven't necessarily improved our lives. And then they had to come to a consensus. (Interview, June 8, 2006).

This approach led to a high level of discourse in the class, as was evident from the discussion of *Parvana's Journey*. The point of view exercise in the reading unit was linked to developing persuasive argument in the writing unit; "you need to think of someone else's point of view to convince that person". (June 8, 2006)

In her language arts planning, Marisa simultaneously looked at and went beyond the reading-writing connection. This connection between reading and writing was not

explicit in the Grade 5 curriculum documents, which identified specific expectations for each. Marisa, in developing written persuasive argument skills, chose to focus on reading and speaking.

I've given the kids opportunities to orally debate and argue. We haven't done much writing yet because I find that the more they talk and the more they role play, the better their writing ends up being.

Through the activities outlined above, Marisa also incorporated media literacy and public speaking skills. In addition, she reinforced the importance of group learning. In explaining her commitment to group work, Marisa said, "I see group work as a scaffold"; "if they can talk about it first, then it helps their work later on".

The source of Marisa's mastery of literacy instruction, however, remains ambiguous. Marisa identified her childhood love of literature as a source. Her commitment to constructivist approaches to learning clearly emerged from her Early Childhood Education program. From there and from her preservice program, she also developed an understanding of emergent literacy. While some of this may have been transferable to her work with older students, it does not account for her complex understanding of the teaching of literary genres. While she respected the knowledge base of her preservice literacy instructor, Marisa did not identify this course as a major influence on her practice. Marisa's principal and mentor seem to have played important roles in identifying particular literacy strategies, yet the beliefs and dispositions seem to have been present prior to entering the teacher education program.

Making Assessment Meaningful

Quizzes and Tests

As a teacher candidate, Marisa expressed a strong commitment to assessment practices that effectively demonstrated achievement of the specific subject expectations being addressed.

As a result, she had reservations about tests and quizzes. She acknowledged that pencil and paper tests were easy to administer, popular with parents, and could be administered to an entire class at once. She also conceded that it was possible to design specific test questions that were “directly related to the topics discussed in class” (M.A. Paper). Indeed, her associate teacher was adept at designing effective tests. Nevertheless, Marisa was concerned that student characteristics such as anxiety could weaken the validity of the results. She also expressed concerns about bias, particularly as it relates to ethnicity and gender. Finally, she criticized the tendency to reinforce rote learning rather than understanding and application. These concerns were heightened due to her experiences working with Justin during a practicum placement. Justin had been unsuccessful in a test situation yet, in subsequent alternative assessment tasks, was able to demonstrate abilities and skills not evident in his test result (M.A. Paper).

Standardized Tests

Assessment and accountability are critical to effective teaching, Marisa believed in her preservice years. She wrote, “I agree that our public education system must be accountable, not because a large sum of taxpayers’ money has been invested in the public education system, but because we *all* benefit when our children are educated” (M.A. Journal). At the same time, she was deeply suspicious of the standardized tests imposed on Ontario schools to improve accountability. She regarded them as “a political ploy to weaken the public’s confidence in the education system” and an attack on the

independence of teachers (M.A. Journal). Her core problem was that these tests were “reflective of the Ontario government’s quest to homogenize the student population.” In particular, while the Education Quality and Accountability Office website stressed the importance of offering students timely information on their progress, she regarded these pencil-and-paper tasks as failing to provide fair assessment enabled students to demonstrate the full range of their learning.

This, she feared, could have a negative impact on the achievement and self-concept of less advantaged students.

As a result, she did not give too much emphasis to the standardized reading assessment she was required to administer to her class. In her first year, Marisa commented:

I do the DRA...but also I try as much as possible to...just listen to the students read, making sure they’re reading something above their level...[To a beginning teacher I would say] be on top of the students, and keep pulling them aside for five minutes and listening to them read, because that five minutes will give you so much more information about what stage they’re at and how they’re doing.

(Interview, ????)

Authentic Assessment Practices

As a teacher candidate, Marisa expressed a strong commitment to assessment practices that effectively demonstrated achievement of the specific subject expectations being addressed. As a result, Marisa’s preference during her preservice years was for more authentic assessment methods. She liked reading response journals because they “act as both a learning activity and assessment strategy”; in order to encourage reader response,

however, she sought to focus on risk-taking and reflective thinking rather than “the formal aspects of writing style or correctness” (M.A. Paper). She also attached great importance to anecdotal records and rating scales of “noteworthy classroom behaviour”, while recognizing the challenges of finding time for ongoing observation and reliable record-keeping (M.A. Paper).

Marisa’s concerns with traditional testing and subsequent reporting of data arose from her commitment to assessment that was accurate and constructive. As a result, she expressed reservations about the standardized Ontario Report Card. The focus on grades and specified curriculum expectations often made it difficult to “report on what a child has learned, how he has learned it, and what learning strategies work best for the child” (M.A. Paper). This was particularly problematic when working with “the unique needs facing students living in low SES communalities” (M.A. Paper). One suggestion Marisa had for dealing with mandatory reporting mechanisms was to also maintain portfolios of student learning. These portfolios, she believed, could provide valuable supplementary information about student learning over time. The major challenge, she acknowledged, would be to find time to maintain and report to parents on portfolios.

As a classroom teacher, it was clear that Marisa was committed to assessing student growth more than the achievement of provincial curriculum expectations. For example, in her first year of teaching, she was critical of the assessment exemplars for Grade 4. While these exemplars were useful in determining performance against a provincial standard, they offered little insight into student progress over the year. This was particularly problematic for English as a Second Language and special education

students. In assessing them, Marisa described herself as being “lenient” in order to recognize their progress (Interview, January 28, 2005).

It was also clear that the provincial curriculum expectations were too narrow to reflect the emphasis on skills development and critical thinking in her class. Rather than using tests or quizzes to assess student reading and writing, Marisa stressed performance tasks. She then had to align these with the provincial expectations when she completed report cards. While committed to assessing learning and accurate reporting, she was also aware that there were no curriculum police ready to arrest teachers who deviated from narrow understandings of curriculum expectations.

Resiliency

The 2006-2007 academic year “was a really tough start” for Marisa. As mentioned earlier, she and her mentor had met several times to develop a “really great literacy plan we were proud of.” After the first class was dismantled, Marisa spent the rest of the first term “trying to build it up again” (January 17, 2007). While she was disappointed and frustrated, Marisa remained committed to her students and maintained a her vision of a strong program. By the time we interviewed her in January, she was finally “starting to see improvement” in student learning and in classroom community.

When asked to compare her motivation in 2006-2007 compared to previous years, Marisa revealed that “first term had me very disillusioned and bitter”. The changes had led to “a lot of work and stress. I think that was probably the time when my motivation was weakest during my two-and-a-half years of teaching” (Interview, January 17, 2007). By January, she was feeling more relaxed and hopeful as she and her class settled into a

new term. While Marisa resented her misfortune, she did not blame anyone. Indeed, she had been a member of the staffing committee that decided how to proceed once the school board decision was made. Throughout the process, the principal ensured that everyone was involved in deciding on the final division of classes. Indeed, Marisa agreed that this was the best option for the students. Being involved in the process, she conceded, helped her deal with the decision.

4. Learning from Marisa's Story

As teacher education programs are reviewed and teacher induction programs expand, it is important that they are designed to reinforce and develop the beliefs and skills new teachers bring to the profession. As Squire (1997) writes, teacher induction methods that draw on the “expertise and life experiences our new colleagues already possess” (p. 222) are necessary if new teachers are to apply the understandings they develop in teacher education programs. Otherwise, a concern with classroom survival (Berliner, 1986) may cause many of them to focus on surface structures, as they lack the skills to delve more deeply in order to discover which details are salient and which are not (Pinnegar, 1995).

Marisa is a teacher who demonstrates a strong ethic of caring combined with a high level of professional competence. The meticulous timing and sense of community are the result of considerable effort and skill on her part. Even after a difficult start to the current academic year, Marisa possessed the resiliency to start from scratch in order to build a strong new learning community.

Through examining artifacts from her preservice education program, classroom observation, and interviews, we have identified characteristics that contribute to Marisa's caring, competence and resiliency.

Marisa has a strong sense of personal identity and commitment to teaching as a vehicle for social change prior to entering the teaching profession. This is evident from her understanding of being *in loco parentis*, which involves demonstrating caring and maintaining discipline. This is coupled with a conviction that she as a teacher has a critical role to play in ensuring that students of all backgrounds have opportunities to succeed as learners. Teacher educators can help preservice teachers need to reflect meaningfully and critically on their experiences in order to identify their sense of purpose and draw on their personal qualities to become effective teachers. Marisa's vision of teaching and learning helped her make sense of the array of learning experiences in both early childhood and preservice education programs. At times reflection may involve critically examining their perspectives in order to become more responsive, as Marisa did when she identified some of the limitations of her homogenous school experiences. Also, according to participants in the larger study, a greater depth of theoretical understanding can help them identify their goals and purposes as teachers (Beck & Kosnik, 2007).

These are professional commitments, not just noble sentiments. Marisa is meticulous in the development of her classroom community and the learning process. In order to promote learning, she ensures that every minute of classroom time is managed effectively. At the same time, she has a strong sense of what needs to be learned and how to structure lessons to ensure that students develop complex skills and understandings. While she is mindful of provincial curriculum expectations, Marisa recognizes the difference between major and minor expectations, and adapts her teaching to individual needs and the diversity of the inner-city community in which she teachers. Teacher

candidates in our larger study consistently stressed the need for practical skills that reinforce theoretical perspectives (Beck & Kosnik, 2007).

One of the most striking aspects of Marisa's classroom practice was her mastery of classroom routines. As Darling-Hammond & (200) note, good intentions must be supported by strong teaching skills. Marisa had a diverse repertoire of teaching and learning strategies and, more significantly, was able to make transitions within and between activities that were quick and seamless. In particular, as Marisa noted, it is important to master the procedures that underlie effective group and cooperative learning. Effective routines maximized the learning for Marisa's inner-city students, ensuring that they benefited from a rich array of learning opportunities each day. Since classroom management is a preoccupation of new teaches, perhaps more attention can be paid to developing community norms and routines.

Long-range planning was one of the greatest challenges faced by Marisa and other participants during their first years of practice. Marisa found that she worked best when she had a comprehensive whole-year plan. This gave her a sense of how the different dimensions connected and allowed her to program decisions that were meaningful to her students. Teachers need either to adapt existing curriculum to the situated needs of their students or, as in Marisa's case, devise their own curriculum suited to these needs. Either way, preservice teachers need guidance in how to plan and integrate curriculum effectively (Beck & Kosnik, 2007). Also, mentors and principals can play an important role in helping new teachers get through the first weeks, and develop the complex program planning skills needed to effectively meet student needs. While Marisa worked tirelessly on her own, she benefited enormously from their guidance.

Assessment is critical to improving student learning (& Black,). While most of our participants recognized the importance of assessment, many felt ill-equipped to understand and utilize assessment effectively (Beck & Kosnik, 2007).. Marisa was unusual in that she entered the program with an understanding of both standardized assessment and more authentic alternatives. This enabled her to think critically about assessment and, more importantly, develop informal assessment instruments and strategies that were meaningful to students and could inform her general teaching practices and her differentiation for individuals. Assessment literacy is critical to both teacher education and support during the induction years.

This life history of Marisa recounts how one novice teacher is successful in drawing on her personal practical knowledge and teacher education experience to address the challenges of becoming a teacher, and adapting to meet new challenges. Particularly noteworthy is Marisa's ability to integrate her personal commitment and identity with high level professional competencies.

Our evidence suggests that becoming a novice teacher is complex. In order to understand this process, we need more life history studies and more studies that identify patterns within larger pools of novice teachers. We wish to stress that this is a study of one teacher framed by a larger study of 20 novice teachers from one institution. Further research is needed on novice teachers from other faculties of education.

Nonetheless, we think that Marisa's life history and the life histories of other successful new teachers can help teacher educators foster such qualities among preservice teachers. Also, Marisa's relatively smooth transition from a novice to a highly skilled

practitioner offers clues about how schools systems can support and sustain such teachers throughout their careers?

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