

**Teacher Development as Social Practice:  
(Women) Learning Life Literacies in Teacher Book Clubs**

Educational reform movements set increasingly ambitious goals and standards for student learning. Demands for change and higher expectations occur in complex contexts of diverse student populations, unparalleled demands for accountability, and persistent budget cuts (Capers, 2004; Darling Hammond & Wallin McLaughlin; Ferguson, 1991; Flecknoe, 2000). Since actual reform and change in schools ultimately relies on teachers (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Fox & Fleischer, 2001; Kooy, 2006), and a growing body of research suggests a strong correlation between skilled, knowledgeable teachers and high levels of student learning (Anness, 2001; Capers, 2004; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Sykes, 1999), it is incumbent on researchers to understand teacher knowledge and learning and how they develop and change.

Armed with such scholarship and evidence, policy makers are demanding quality professional development although they lack the essential information on how to define its content and character or availability to teachers (Borko, 2004). This oversight is critical. To counter the traditional teacher workshop model and include teachers in sustained teacher development as a way to explore their learning and development over time, the study reported here (2000-2003) introduces two groups of women teachers (novice and experienced) who structured and enacted their interactive teacher development.

**Background and Context**

Teacher development often consist of “one-shot workshops” (Clark, 2001; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991) in which “experts” (e.g., policy advisors, academics, consultants) transmit their knowledge on some aspect of education (new policies, programs, pedagogy, procedures, e.g.). Such models assume that teachers are found wanting and require fixing what is wrong (the deficit model). Rather than repairing, however, they have, as Sykes (1996) observed:

. . . entered educational parlance as shorthand for superficial, faddish, in-service education that supports a mini-industry of consultants without having much effect on what goes on in schools and classrooms. The resources devoted to professional development are too meager and their deployment too ineffective to matter. (464)

With no follow-up, little is known about the residual and long-term effects on teacher knowledge, practices or changes in the quality of student learning.

The common and accepted form of professional development casts a forceful shadow into school classrooms: If teachers are “taught” by attending and listening, they “learn” that passive reception is sanctioned and perpetuated as viable teaching practice. Moreover, their existing professional knowledge is ignored, undermined and unaccounted for. This perpetuates the role of teachers as technicians and intentional or not, *deprofessionalize* teaching.

To complicate matters, the teaching profession has been largely conducted and interpreted as “women’s work” and it remains women who traditionally and numerically dominate (my daughter-in-law’s junior K – Grade 5 school has *only* women on staff). What does that mean for how professional knowledge is practiced? The gender question remains unexplored. While it is true that more women have taken up administrative

positions, we cannot assume that provides a sufficient condition for including women as full participants in the profession. The gender issue remains nettlesome and negotiating ways of reshaping women's roles and places in the profession is timely and critical to understanding teaching.

To revitalize the profession, to *reprofessionalize*, requires a significant shift in thinking and practice. To grow professionally, teachers must actively pursue their learning and be accountable for their knowledge (Darling-Hammond and Sykes [1999] call teaching "the learning profession"). Since construction of knowledge occurs most effectively in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1992; Shulman, 1998; Wenger, 1998, the study reported here explores small communities of practice of self-directed and ongoing professional learning and knowledge.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical orientation and grounding of the study is located within three key research fields: (1) teacher development; (2) social construction of knowledge and, (3) gender and teaching.

#### Teacher Development

Teachers are at the heart of the educational process and determine the effects and scope of any change in policy and reform (Fullan, 2001). Hence, understanding what teachers know, how they know it, and how their epistemologies develop have become increasingly critical in light of findings connecting the quality and extent of teacher knowledge to the improvement of student learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Printy & Marks, 2004; Sykes, 1999).

Dewey's notion of starting with what children know (1938) and Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' may be an effective way to view adult learning as well. Indeed, recent research and theory point to the need for professional programs to include and account for teachers' personal practical knowledge and experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). Alternative forms of professional learning in which teachers interactively construe and construct their knowledge in small communities (Churchill, 1996; Clark, 2001; Kooy, 2006) begin with and build on existing teacher knowledge. Evidence from studies including teachers (of both genders) suggests radical shifts in learning and knowledge when initiated by teachers themselves (see Clark, 2001; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999, e.g.). Moreover, teachers able to theorize their experience make their knowledge a more critical, revisionary tool (Scott, 1992). In this way, theories become dynamic and lead to productive dialogue and generative reflection (Ritchie & Wilson, 18). The "rub between theory and practice" (Miller & Silvernail, 1994) centers on the critical activities of teaching and learning through disciplined inquiry supported and built on substantial professional discourse (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000).

## (2) Social Contexts for Learning

We make sense of what goes on around us—and our part in it—by actively constructing a world for ourselves (Vygotsky, 1992; Bruner, 1986). The models we create of how the world functions help us understand our lives and guides our actions although this does not happen in isolation. Bakhtin's (1986) dialogical theory proposes that thinking and learning depend on multiple voices, each stemming from the voices that came before and

blending with the voices already in place. The social interactions both construct and change knowledge (Bahktin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1992). Knowledge develops and is continually modified in the light of new experiences (Dewey, 1938). New understandings emerge from this interplay (Grimshaw, 1989; Grumet, 1991; Gumperz, 1992; Rommetveit, 1992).

This progressive understanding of the dialogical and social construction of knowledge supports the theory that the most effective teacher development occurs within communities of learning (Ancess, 2001; Au, 2002; Barone, 1996; Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003; Churchill, 1996; Clark, 1996; Clark, 2001; Clement, 2000). Hence, the research built on this theory is conducted with teachers in a community of reciprocal and interactive dialogue (Bahktin, 1986; Stein & Brown, 1997; Supovitz, 2002).

The opportunity to move from learning *from* others to learning *with* others allows teachers to develop new knowledge as their perspectives “interpenetrate” and “interanimate” each other. Their interpretive frameworks are modified, expanded and realized—particularly through conflict, disagreement and contrasting perspectives (Nystrand, 1997; Wertsch, 1991). Indeed, authentic communities cannot exist unless participants learn to renegotiate and expand their views that understandably, occur over sustained periods of time (Clark, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 1999).

The rub between theory and practice (Miller & Silvernail, 1994) occurs as disciplined inquiry supported by substantial professional discourse (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). In a dialogic teacher community, participants take risks and engage in reflective assessment (Zellermayer, 2001). Bahktin (1981). They construct a dialogic approach to theory, making it “internally persuasive . . . half ours and half

someone else's" (345-346). In this way, theories become dynamic and lead to productive dialogue and generative reflection (Ritchie & Wilson, 18) leading teachers to adopt critical stances for greater understanding not only of their own work but also of the body of research (Berliner, 2003).

Teacher involvement in social groups has taken hold in multiple forms that range significantly in purpose, textual variety, and experiences: For instance, Clark's "conversational inquiry groups" (2000) and O'Connell Rust's (2002) "conversation groups;" Craig and Olson's (2002) "knowledge communities;" and Berliner (2003)'s teacher groups learning to read complex educational research articles. While dialogic communities can take multiple forms, I adopted a popular phenomenon of the book club to create social groupings of teachers. The burgeoning phenomenon—widely popularized by Oprah, for instance—has been virtually ignored in the research. Only recently has documentation, evidence, and interpretation begun (Long, 2003, Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995), albeit these address the phenomenon outside of educational contexts.

Book clubs suggest a collective gathering around texts. Members negotiate meaning, develop their thoughts, "internalize the voices of the other members" (Marshall, Smagorinsky & Smith, 1995, 119), and form and deepen friendships (Cardwell, 2002; Kooy, 2006a; Long, 2003; Marshall, Smagorinsky & Smith, 1995). Within interpretive communities where narratives intersect and interact, teachers expand their imaginative capacities, (re)create the stories of their professional lives, and (re)construct their professional knowledge (Beattie, 1995; Clark, 2001; Kooy, 2006a; McIntyre, 1998). By articulating their knowledge in dialogue with others, teachers can learn to interpret their

own narratives in the context of the wider network of teacher knowledge (Rust & Orland, 2001; Shulman, 1998).

From that perspective, the book club construct seems to provide a suitable context for teacher learning (Clark, 1996, 2001; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2001; Kooy, 2006 in press, 2006a). The book club as part of mainstream popular culture, however, has rarely been subject to serious academic inquiry (but see Long, 2003). Considering the longevity of many book clubs and even how much book clubs seem to mean to their participants, it seems extraordinary such groups have remained “so invisible to scholars” (Long, 2003, ix).

### (3) Women Teachers

Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, women have predominated in the teaching profession at the rate of two to one, on average (Apple, 1985; Prentice & Theobald, 1991). Yet, women’s voices have traditionally been significantly muted by their male counterparts (Belenky, et al, 1997). To counter the prevailing conditions, Maxine Greene urged women teachers to take up the challenge to make contributions “after years of having their understandings dismissed” and claim their experience to be as “significant as a man’s” (1995, 22).

Despite the realities of women’s pervasive and predominant presence, studies of gender and teaching (at the elementary and secondary levels) remains on the boundaries of the research literature (Scott, 1992; Shore, 2000). British writer and educator Jane Miller reminds us that while some progress has been made, shadows remain: “The periodic spasms of suspicion and criticism leveled at state education in this country [UK]

are hard to understand without some sense of how gender distinctions have always – covertly as well as openly – articulated with discussions of education” (1992, 1).

Traditionally, what has counted as knowledge has been identified and codified in ways that contemporary educators characterize as gendered (Baruch, 1991; Belsey, 1993; Schweikart, 1986) leading to skewed perceptions and misrepresentations of teacher knowledge and development. This calls into question the androcentric bias of the production and dissemination of knowledge on teaching and the spurious claims of objectivity inscribed in a good deal of education research (Miller, 1996, 258).

The concept of “women’s ways of knowing” (Belenky et al, 1997; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Gilligan, 2002; Heilbrun, 1999; Ruddick, 1980) has gained considerable attention. Grumet (1988) argues against the “consistent and flagrant exclusion of female experience from the organization and life of schools” (34). She warns that “the emulsifying and idealist standard of androgyny” (xix) is a way to strip the discussion of gender. The route of androgyny either falsely or naively assumes that women have “arrived” or that “teaching is teaching” regardless of gender. Gender as a non-issue may be part of political and cultural forces to ignore or even suppress women’s knowledge (LeBlanc & Witty, 1996; Rich, 1979; Scott, 1992; Stimpson, 1989). Though women teachers are far from the marginalizations common in earlier times, a distance has yet to be travelled before these shadows on teacher knowledge have dissipated.

Career paths vary as well (Lieberman & Miller, 1999, 66). Women often interrupt their careers to raise children; they represent over three-fourths of caregivers of children (Noddings, 1991). The gap(s) in their careers related to maternal and childcare responsibilities has traditionally been undermined and even ignored in theory and

research on the nature of teaching (Acker, 1995; Apple, 1985; Clifford, 1989; Ruddick, 1980). But what if we began to view and acknowledge the knowledge created in this gap as practical knowledge for teaching? Dewey's (1938) notion of experience that reaches beyond formal learning in schools (including maternal, child-rearing experiences) could be implicated in how (women) teachers understand and practice teaching. The gap in the research could lead to inquiries on teaching and learning from feminist viewpoints; that is, integrating knowledge and theory that accounts for and implements "women's ways of knowing" (Belenky et al, 1997) in the art and practice of teaching.

I find this particularly compelling in light of most research that perpetuates a "teaching is teaching" perspective that undermines gender as a factor in understanding teaching (e.g., *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, 1996). In suggesting that women's ways of teaching may be gender reflective, I do not claim to speak for all women teachers. Even though the majority of teachers in the Western world are and remain, primarily white, middle class and privileged (Apple, 1985; Biklen, 1995; LeBlanc Kohl & Witty, 1996), their students represent increasingly diverse cultures and languages (Toronto, the site of this study, for instance, is the most multicultural city in the world. It is not unusual to have more than 50 different languages represented in an urban high school). I argue for, and indeed work towards, realizing a teaching force that more closely represents the students in the schools and, consequently, includes the multicultural voices of such women teachers in this and other educational research. I fear, however, that waiting until such representation occurs will lead to untenable delays in asking critical gender questions.

I recognize that as the researcher, I am a white woman in the academy (hence, privileged). My history and journey to this research, however, began with immigration from Europe after World War II. The only immigrant in the country schools where I began my Canadian education, I learned very early on how to accommodate and vigilantly maintain the boundaries between my school and family worlds. I was a daughter of a factory worker father and a homemaker mother, the eighth of nine children in a poor family. While not underprivileged (stable family, for instance), I very nearly did not have the material opportunity to attend university (none of my older siblings completed secondary school before going to work) and hence, to undertake this research journey. Although now solidly middle class and a university professor, the history that formed me as an educator informs the questions of my research. I acknowledge that my particular vantage point as person and woman, as professor and researcher, is deeply implicated in the work.

I resist, nevertheless, the monolithic claim to speak for all women in the knowledge that the category “woman” is fluid. Men, like women, are constituted differently across markers of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other signifiers that make it impossible and indeed, undesirable, to generalize or definitively mark their ways of thinking and being in the profession (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Shore, 1999). Albeit that the markers of gender are fluid, the problem remains that women’s voices have not been adequately represented in the professional discourse. We cannot wait until all women whose social class and race prohibit their voices from being heard, have the power and privilege to do so. Nor should we defer to the limits of gender knowledge. Lesley Shore (2000) writes:

I find it unspeakably ironic that, in search for a woman-authored alternative to the education in patriarchy we have received against the backdrop of a new pedagogy of care whose founding premise is to create safe spaces for women to learn to speak, the problem of essentialism still threatens to silence many of the new voices (15).

Like other traditional female professions (nursing, social work), teaching has been identified with an image of 'social housekeeping.' As "women's work," it is seen as an extension of the domestic sphere with a resulting loss of discretion, autonomy, and status. Such images have been problematic (Pagano, 1990) and affected the teaching profession in ways that continue in spite of advances in equity for women. Indeed, while women continue to be the majority in the profession, their teacher voices and knowledge have yet to be fully expressed and represented (Atwell-Vasey, 1998; Clandinin, 1993; Grumet, 1988; Kooy, 2006a, in press; Pagano, 1990).

Feminist research on "women's ways of knowing" (Belenky, et al, 1988 e.g.) and learning (Hayes & Flannery, 2000) make us aware that women's learning, different knowledge, and ways of being in the world, need to be understood and valued. Historically women have dominated the profession, but their knowledge has only too readily been dismissed as just that—women's knowledge. Few studies have been concerned with women teachers.

### **Methodology**

Narrative serves both as phenomenon and as a method for understanding teaching (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, 4). Methodologically, narrative offers a way to bring forth the stories of professional practice that teachers carry (Carter, 1990, 1993; Connelly &

Clandinin, 1990, 1986). Narrative inquiry investigates the ways stories are told, heard and read and the contexts in which they occur, influence and shape teacher knowledge.

Narrative methods include constructing field texts to represent aspects of field experience through interviews, conversations, dialogues, responses to texts, storytelling, reflective journals, stories of professional practice, autobiographical writings (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Gillard, 1996). Through narrative inquiry, I explore the ways stories are told and read in social contexts and the ways in which stories shape teachers' knowledge and contribute to their professional development (Trimmer, 1997b).

### ***Process and procedures***

Two teacher book clubs (one novice, one experienced teachers) met separately every five to six weeks over the course of three academic years (2000-2003). Each year began with a "planning session" to submit required research forms, determine schedules for interviews and book club meetings, select the texts to be read, and agree on the processes for conducting each book club session. In preparation for each session, the teachers read the selected text and in doing so, decided to prepare notes, jottings, or logs of observations, issues and questions. They took these notes and the text to each meeting. Both groups agreed on an informal discussion model; that is, no formal leadership or preparation was required.

Individual and group interviews occurred at the beginning and end of each academic year. In addition to preparing reading notes, each teacher reflected at length on her reading life in both a "literacy autobiography" (personal journeys to the reading life) and reading surveys. I participated as both researcher and book club member. Each

session was either audio or videotaped (and later transcribed). I prepared field notes after each book club meeting.

### *The teacher participants*

The study included two small cohorts of women teachers. Book Club 1, a group of experienced teachers, participated in an earlier pilot project (1998-2000). Five of the original seven teachers (including me) agreed to continue into this study. Book Club 2 consisted of nine novice teachers who, at the end of their teacher education year, proposed creating a book club to maintain a reading life and continue their relationships as they entered the teaching profession.

The two book clubs consist of two groups of women teachers (Sorensen, 1998). During the pilot study, the teachers often raised the relevance of being a “women only” group. The need to meet with other women teachers, to develop relationships and socially construct their teacher knowledge became increasingly relevant and even critical to their professional development. It became important and sensible to include questions of gender in the research on teacher development. With the scant literature on women teachers in the field, this study marks a step forward.

Book Club 1’s teaching experiences ranged from seven to twenty-five years at the onset of this study. Professionally, they work in a range of educational contexts: three secondary English teachers (Louise, Bridget, and Patricia) and two teacher education professors (Lesley who began as a sessional instructor and became a faculty member in 2001, and myself). This group joined the pilot project of a teacher book through calls for volunteers in schools, graduate classes and by word of mouth. The women in the study

are white, middle class women. In Book Club 1 (experienced teachers), two are European immigrants. I emigrated from The Netherlands in the early years of my elementary education; Bridget emigrated from the U.K. as an adult/teacher in the mid-1990s. Patricia is the daughter of European immigrants. Louise's British and Lesley's Jewish heritage were planted in Canada in the late 1800s.

The nine teachers of Book Club 2 entered the study as novice teachers. All secured teaching appointments; six in the urban and metropolitan area of Toronto; one within an hour and two within two hours' driving range of Toronto. Five taught English exclusively. Four taught an second subject: two Drama (Lucy and Melanie); one Spanish (Helen); one History (Evelyn). Most of these teachers were children of European immigrants (Lucy, Evelyn [Italy]; Helen and Melanie [Greece]; Sandra and Liz [Portugal]). Sandra, for instance, teaches in a high school in an area known as "Little Portugal" in Toronto; many of her students share her Mediterranean culture and background. Nevertheless, although not necessarily or specifically representative of the cultural compositions of their schools, many of their histories include family stories of immigration, adjusting, and the problems and tensions of being caught between and belonging to two cultures.

Why women only in the study? A number of seemingly sensible reasons informed my choice for this study (Kooy, 2006a; Sorenson, 1998). For one, only a group of women volunteered and since I already had an existing women's group (begun as a pilot study two years earlier), the new group allowed me to consider and research two groups of women at distinct and different phases in their careers. The women themselves specifically requested that I keep the book clubs as "women's only" groups suggesting

that “men would change things” and “our conversations would be completely different.” It appears that for these women, being in the company of other women provided a sense of ownership and agency that they felt would be compromised with men in the group. Heilbrun noted that such power represents “the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter” (1988, 18).

Over the course of the study, the issue of community of women teachers became increasingly relevant and even critical to the participants' professional development. The study provided an opportunity to investigate and explore questions of gender in the research on teacher development, a critical issue in teacher education and learning given the scant presence in the research literature on women teachers in the field.

### ***The data of the study***

Data was collected from both written and oral sources: Interviews, surveys, literacy autobiographies, e-mail messages on the conference site, and, most significantly, transcripts of the discussions in the book club sessions. Over the course of the study, each group selected to read: *Plainsong* [Kent Haruf], *A Lesson before Dying* [Ernest J. Gaines] *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* [Jeanette Winterson], and *In the Name of Salomé* [Julia Alvarez] at different points in the research. This unpredictable opportunity of shared texts in the two groups allowed me to explore similarities and differences in the discourse, topics, and narratives of two groups of teachers at distinctive career stages.

The study invokes a narrative inquiry approach to the research which allows using stories as a heuristic for learning and thinking and a method for understanding teaching (Clandinen & Connelly, 1999, 4). Narrative inquiry offers a way to bring forth the stories

of professional practice that teachers carry (Carter, 1990, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1986) and investigates the ways stories are told, heard and read and the contexts in which they occur, and how they influence and shape teacher knowledge.

Narrative methods require constructing field texts to represent aspects of field experience through interviews, conversations, dialogues, responses to texts, storytelling, reflective journals, stories of professional practice, autobiographical writings (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Gillard, 1996). The dialogues generated were analyzed using a system of conversational analysis (Hutchby & Woofett, 1997) by segmenting the discourse into steps: (1) transcribing the verbal activities, (2) constructing “maps” to organize the data into themes, topics, units, and messages, (3) identifying questions and issues for triangulation, and, (4) a description and explanation of the observations (research text).

### **Findings and Results**

I present the findings and discussions of the study in brief in this section under the following headings: (1) teacher learning and development (2) book clubs; and, (3) women teachers. NEED TO OPEN WITH A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE 2 GROUPS OF TEACHERS—WHAT DIFFERENCE DID THIS MAKE?

"This is the hardest year I have ever lived!"

"I had a complete meltdown in my class this week!"

"I was like a leech listening and absorbing their dialogue as I heard different perspectives on the books and teaching."

"The book club is an incredible support system of women who understand the challenges and experienced them with me the whole way through."

These sentiments, expressed by members of a novice teacher book club, capture the essence of their self-directed professional development. In my three-year longitudinal SSHRC study (2000-2004), these teachers read and told teaching stories in a supportive and challenging social context and over time, reconstructed their personal, practical knowledge. Novice teachers involved in sustained, self-directed teacher development is a startling concept. Teachers dialogically and relationally, examined, identified, and revised their knowledge and identity in the context of a teacher book club (SSHRC 2000-2004).

#### (1) Teacher Learning and Development

Since most books under discussion included teachers, the book clubs frequently took the opportunity to examine the teachers and prompted them to (re)consider their own teaching. While this happened in both groups, the focus reflected the teachers' knowledge and classroom experiences.

In the novice teacher group, a relevant example occurs in a discussion of *In the Name of Salomé*. Stories of learning, teaching, gender, and the evolving and uncertain nature of teacher identity intersect on the axis between the teachers in the book clubs and Salomé and Camila, mother and daughter teachers in the novel.

Julia Alvarez's fictional account of the real-life Salomé Ureña, national poet in the Dominican Republic who leaves her poetry to start a school for girls, engaging them in acquiring a critical literacy ("a set of wings") into their lives, and effectively preparing

them to serve their struggling nation. Salomé's teaching experiences and stories proved an educative experience. At one point, Rosemary reflects on Salomé's teaching:

Rosemary: She breaks down the traditions of girls' education of only sitting straight and stitching. She changes their lives. That's why she incites such passion in these girls and such commitment and dedication, because they know this is authentic educational experience. [Evelyn: Yeah, that's right.] She openly rejects the, "you sit straight and you sew and you don't open your mouth" model for her school.

Evelyn: She had wanted more herself, as a student, very early on. She was a learner herself. She got that from her father, and Pancho, too.

Melanie: I think ultimately, she came to a realization that she'd be doing good. That was more important—to educate others—than to keep her life as a poet. I don't know if that makes sense or not, but—

Evelyn: How politically powerful that gesture, that act, was, of going to school! She was subversive and the children were subversives. [Mary: They knew it.]. They knew it. How exciting that must have been. Scary and exciting [Rosemary: Scary and exciting.] When was it? There was a parade or something, and she had all the girls wear bandannas. I don't know, I thought that was, "wow!" They knew they were part of something bigger than themselves. This was a big deal. The courage it must have taken for these parents to send their kids in secret.

Early in year two of their induction, Salomé's organic and critical approaches to teaching (Brock et al, 2001; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1997; hooks, 1994) impresses the novice teachers. They discuss her untrained, intuitive teaching sensibilities (Grossman, 1990). Melanie observes: "It's amazing to read, to see that, to be part of that world for a little while, to see where it came from."

Salomé's stories offer the novice teachers a place to deliberate and question, to explore models and effects of teaching, to learn, and return to their schools with new insights (Atwell Vasey, 1998; Brock et al, 2001; Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000; Jarvic, 2000). By reading about teachers in the novel, the book club teachers encountered new perspectives. Armed with Salomé's powerful stories of teaching, they will have ideas with which to extend their own teaching repertoires. They will, in effect, have more to work with and draw from in their ongoing conceptual and pedagogical development (Adams, 1986; Rodgers & Pinnell, 2002; Schultz, 1996; Trimmer, 1997 a, b). In the community of other teachers and the teachers in the book, they participate in ongoing construction of their developing, knowledgeable, teacher selves (Haight Cattani, 2002; Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Rogoff, 1990; Schubert, 1991).

The novice teachers were able to apply their learning to disrupt and unsettle their thinking. In the first book club meeting (Year one of the study), the teachers tackled the concept of teaching and learning when they discussed the book *Plainsong* by Kent Haruf where the two teachers in the book rarely appear in their classrooms, if at all (Maggie, for instance) and teaching occurs in unexpected contexts and situations. In deliberating on what teaching is, they interpret teaching to exist more broadly than generally accepted. Though Melanie suggests that in the book, "Everyone teaches something," she later

seems to backtrack and seems genuinely piqued and puzzled as she confronts her long-held conceptions of “learning.”

See, now I'm starting to waver on some of my ideas because in my life, school was always something solid. It's school and then there's everything else. In high school, I had lots of friends, I was always part of this club and part of that club. It wasn't just the studies that were my life but now it seems like this book is saying that school isn't that solid. Yes, school is part of your life but it isn't the whole thing, that entire rock. Does it say that? I'm feeling like that's what we're saying now, or is that--?

Evelyn: I think you can have many different scenarios. I don't think it's one or the other.

Rosemary: You can learn in many different [Melanie: Places?] places and from many different angles. It's life.

Melanie: It's not just in school where you learn.

Helen: That's it. I was going to say that learning is everywhere. [All: Yes.]

Melanie: See but to me, when I was younger, I always thought that the only place you really learned was school.

As a seasoned educator, this development surprised me. Learning only in school? What kind of pressure must new teachers feel if they assume that their lessons must comprehensively constitute the world of learning for their students? This is an apt reminder for me—and the others in the circle—to make space for reciprocal deliberations, contradictory knowledge and negotiations of existing teacher knowledge.

Though Melanie raised an epistemological question, we cannot necessarily say she (nor we) arrived at a satisfactory answer. What we can say, it seems to me, is that raising the issue compelled the teachers to think about it and in that dialogue, make the issue one of conscious awareness. The issue is not so much to provide ‘the answer,’ as to note the evolving and changing development process of teacher knowledge particularly so early in their teaching induction.

Evelyn: I really enjoyed reading this [book] at this time of my own learning process, because, ironically, in my Senior History course—we were just looking this week at American involvement in Latin America. [Mary: Oh, my goodness, how appropriate because this is a history book of the finest order.] Oh unbelievable, unbelievable historical fiction. I loved it. [Mary: Would you read this in your history class?] Yes. I told my students about this book because we were talking about Latin America and Guatemala and the Dominican Republic in 1965. The invasions of those countries go back to the 1880’s. Reading this book was fantastic.

Evelyn imagines her book club reading into her teaching in her History class, demonstrating how her new knowledge “travels” (Franke, 2005), a process critical to her teacher development. She is able to conceive of the content of the novel (set in an actual historic period and characters) contributing to the stories of her History class. How the book will “travel” at this stage seems to focus on content, though this may be an essential component of making the transition from book club to school practices.

For the first time since the group has been meeting, Evelyn seeks the input of her peers to solve a teaching problem. She asks for feedback from the others and, in the process, begins to question her own practices:

I’d be interested to hear your perspective. I want to do *The Shipping News* in my class but as I was driving here this morning, I thought, “Well, I want to do everything, but why am I not giving—Just because it’s an OAC course. I did “literature circles” with the Grade 9s. It was lovely. They got to choose their own books and, right from the beginning, I was buying into the process. Wonderful. Why don’t I entertain that for the OACs? Why can’t I give them the opportunity to have literature circles?”

Evelyn wonders why she has successfully used literature circles with her Grade 9 classes but has not implemented them with her senior classes. Melanie describes this issue in reverse. Melanie is doubtful; Evelyn more surprised at her oversight that, in the telling, becomes apparent. The two contradictory stories highlight possibilities for learning and open conversations around how and why it is important that knowledge is socially constructed by students at all grade levels.

The experienced teachers (Book Club 1) also use teachers in the texts to deconstruct and understand teaching. In Kent Haruf's *Plainsong*, the teacher Maggie provided a powerful template for active self-reflection and learning. Though she never appears teaching in the classroom, it is obvious that Maggie has an impact on all those around her including her students. At one point, for instance, she takes in a pregnant student locked out by her mother. Lesley notes: "To bring the student right into her house and that the student knows to approach her teacher even so late at night. [All: Yes.] It's a different kind of vision of teaching and the role of the teacher. Patricia adds:

A student wouldn't phone her up when she [Maggie] was already in bed if she were a stern, in front of the classroom kind of teacher. Obviously, there's a relationship there or a sense that Maggie is a compassionate, caring person who would forgive that kind of calling late at night. Does this reaction echo the stereotype of, "a woman's work is never done?"

Patricia observes that Maggie's "practical knowledge undoubtedly affects her life in the classroom," implying that Maggie interpreted her obligations to her students to extend beyond school boundaries. Maggie offers an account of a teacher respected and admired by colleagues and students alike. Unabashed by the traditional limitations put on the lives of women who teach she crosses the boundaries of the public and private world in unprecedented ways. This is striking since, particularly for women teachers who have been taught to be vigilant about the boundaries between our public and private worlds, though we may personally chafe at the artificiality of this separation.

In a remarkable moment of symbiosis between literature and life, Lesley uses Maggie's example to re-think her own teaching life. In her reading journal, she explained:

*Maggie has allowed me to be “transgressive” in ways that reading bell hooks and Gilligan’s theories, wonderfully inspiring though they are, did not. However, it is that fiction weaves its ways into the lived experience of life, in that magic confluence of timing. I needed Maggie’s fictional example to become the border-crossing, boundary-jumping teacher I have always been in my heart, but for many years, lacked the courage to become.*

Maggie who exists only in our imaginations, enters the dialogue about what it means to be a teacher. She helps us internalize and find ways to resist the public image of teachers (Tompkins, 1986). When Lesley observed that, “Maggie gave me permission to change,” a fictional teacher becomes a catalyst for change. In an e-mail Lesley forwards to the group a week after the book club meeting, she wrote:

*Plainsong has been a liberatory text for me because it has freed me from the pressure of measuring myself against the prevailing stereotypes and scripts of a woman’s life and released me from all kinds of judgments people make. An unmarried woman who teaches is not necessarily a shriveled old prune. The characters’ kinship groups and family structures Haruf portrays in the novel open up the possibilities for my own alternative models and lighten the load of guilt I bear for failing to maintain the “cover” story of a “normal” female life.*

Lesley creates a critical incident—looking at Maggie objectively to reconstruct herself. Maggie becomes a model who nudges Lesley to rename the pieces of her “silenced” life,

giving her, in her own words, “permission to change.” Although testimonies about life-changing germinal texts is not particularly new, renegotiating a female identity using a fictional teacher-woman may well be.

In that context and with their experience, the teachers determine how this book might be introduced into a high school curriculum:

Patricia: I'm already giving it to our librarian at least to get it into the school library. I would use it. I would use it though with a small group for a novel study or an independent novel study and do comparisons with other books.

Bridget: It would be great for OACs [Ontario's Grade 13 at the time] or Grade 12 independent study.

Lesley: You could get into some trouble in some schools [Patricia: Yeah] because the pregnant unwed mother is heroic.

Patricia: Right. Not to mention some of the graphic sex scenes.

Bridget: If you had it as a core novel, I think in certain situations, yeah, I think you probably would have some problems.

Lesley: What about this book in a Catholic school? There's no way. It would be fine for teachers who are going into the Catholic system. There's no way you could teach this in a Catholic school in Ontario.

Patricia: But I can probably teach it at Joan of Arc School. [Mary: Yeah, you probably could.] I think I could. [Lesley: You have a wider berth.] Yeah.

Mary: I think you'd want to be able to do this with senior high school students, because where better to put the issues on the table than in a supportive school environment where students and teachers can discuss and try to understand the problems together. The teacher is, after all, a sensible adult voice. In fact, it could be interesting. There may, for instance, be a young mother in the class [Lesley: Oh yeah, it's true.] who could teach the others about what it means to be, like Victoria, a teen parent.

Lesley: And why Victoria has such a deep need to have this child, and why for her it is really a good thing to have this child.

Bridget: And also for the boys as well to read about those positive male characters would be good.

Lesley: What a role model they would be.

The teachers, familiar with school policies, practices, and the possibilities of introducing new literature into the curriculum, consider the text and envision the potential problems and benefits that could potentially arise by introducing this novel. The chasm between the lived lives of adolescents and their lives outside of school can potentially be linked to the texts adolescents study in high school. The divide remains, however.

## (2) Book Clubs

The teacher book clubs provide one manifestation of a popular phenomenon (Oprah's popularizing book clubs, for instance) and the recent changes in conceptions of professional development in small, collaborative communities of practice (Au, 2002; Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Clark, 2000; Flood et al, 1994; Warshauer Freedman, 2001) reflect progressive understanding of dialogical and social constructivism (Grossman & Wineburg, 2000).

Since the teachers in both groups were or had been English teachers, gathering around (mostly fictional) books, many of which included teachers, seemed sensible and compelling. The book club allowed the reading, telling and hearing narratives from the text and teacher colleagues; from teaching and from life. Through the social interactions, teachers found opportunities to co-construct their stories of teaching. For the novice book group, this often means question ("Can I ask you a question about classroom management?"); negotiating knowledge "But I don't think"; "I didn't read Camila that way at all"; reflecting on the difficulties of managing a teaching life ("My problem is that I got to the point where I just couldn't do any more work. I'm very embarrassed about how long it's taken me to get stuff back to kids") or exposing a problem that might be politically untenable within the school ("I had a complete meltdown in my class the day before yesterday. I was so upset. I lost it. Totally freaked out on my kids. I need to do stress management"); contributing to another teachers' knowledge ("You know what? Maybe I can help."); and, mutual support ("That actually makes me feel good. You know why? I really respect you as a person and teacher. If you can have bad days like that, it's okay, because then I can give myself permission to have bad days, too").

In this book club discussion, Helen's opening "cover story" of a self-assured and competent classroom manager becomes increasingly uncertain and fragile. As she tells and simultaneously re-thinks her stories, she recognizes that others share similar experiences and finds herself able to be more open and honest. This courageous move becomes possible only as she feels increasingly safe in the group and learns to trust the others.

The book club group became increasingly important to the novice teachers as Helen noted: "In the book club I have people to talk to, human resources that can help me in my work as a teacher." Evelyn compared the book club sessions to a "workout. I leave energized." Sandra discussed the advantages of the shared stories:

The comparing and exchanging help me think about my teaching. Without my good book club friends, I would not have the time or the energy to think about the important issues and questions for me right now. Each time I come, I add another thread to my web of knowledge

The novice teachers became increasingly aware of individual differences, knowledge and perspectives as well as the benefits of the interchanges and exchanges. Liz and Kerri noted in their surveys (respectively): "I'm amazed by the different perspectives in this group of women teachers."

The experienced teacher group, having met for two years in a pilot study at the onset of this study, had established relationships, protocols, and a discourse that moved organically and interactively—adding, completing, and supporting understandings of the text:

Bridget: When we read a book, we live inside it don't we? If it's a powerful book for us, we start to think a little bit like the book. I know I catch myself doing that [M: You live there.] when I'm inside the book. [Lesley: You do live there — you live in the text and that's compelling.]. (*Plainsong book club*)

Compared to their novice counterparts, these seasoned veterans took the time to explore the books, to understand reading as a social practice staged to “walk around a mutually interesting place” (Clark, 2001, 18).

Reflections in written surveys prepared revealed the importance of the teacher communities (2004). “For me,” Patricia wrote, “the social aspects [of the book club] were very important.” Lesley added: “The discussions really brought an intimacy to the group. Though we all connected to the books and topics differently, at the same time, we clearly demonstrated our diversity.”

Bridget (Book Club 1) observed that she found a “new respect and openness for different perspectives” (Survey, 2004). At times, different worldviews and theories collided.

Lesley (Book Club 1) provides a clear example:

I remember vividly a rather heated exchange with Louise where I said that what the war in Afghanistan was really all about was women's freedom. She didn't agree—not surprisingly—but what I loved about our (relatively frequent) differences of opinion was how we both felt safe enough in the setting of the book club to hear each other out without any animosity. (2004)

Lesley and Louise learned to understand, accept and learn from one another's diverse worldviews. They could, as Sorenson (1998) noted, be "friends to each others' minds."

The varied perspectives and knowledge within the group (Clark, 2001; Rust & Orland, 2001) resulted in a gestalt; that is, book club teachers accomplished considerably more socially than possible individually.

The novice teacher group reflected on the effects of meeting as a book club. Kerri observed: "We need to know that we share the same challenges and we need to learn from each other. This is what our book club of teachers does." "We come together [in book club] as very good friends," Sandra observed. "It's relationships, not a mandated workshop or class, that make the learning possible," Shelly wrote.

Placing the learning in a social context/book club expects teachers to do the work, to construct their worlds by weaving stories in literature and from life and classrooms, opens spaces for ongoing transformation. Greene (2000) seems to endorse the book club when she observes: "Once granted the ability to reflect upon their practice within a complex context, teachers can be expected to make their choices out of their own situations and open themselves to descriptions of the whole" (Greene, 12). Melanie observed: "It's because of this support system [the book club] that I've been able to survive [the first year of teaching]."

The collective efforts of the teachers productively bridged and even blurred conventional distinctions between research (university) and practical knowledge (schools) of teaching. In the social context of the book club, the teachers engaged in meaningful dialogue that deepens understanding of their own local reality and their teaching selves (Kooy, 2006, in press; Mitchell & Weber, 1999).

This became particularly important to the novice teachers who, already at the onset of their induction, participated in ongoing teacher learning they constructed and developed. In the book club, they learned to make their practices transparent and their knowledge public to cultivate a “scholarship of reflective teaching” (Craig & Olson, 2002, 117).

Sandra: This [book club] is so important for teachers to do and we don’t.

[Melanie: At all.] I guess that teachers get bitter about their profession and feel isolated when they don’t have this opportunity to come together and [Evelyn: Because it’s hopeful]. It kind of gives you [Melanie: an excitement about the curriculum].

### (3) Women teachers

Gender issues both inside and outside the boundaries of teaching emerged in virtually all the book club discussions of both groups. Discussions of *In the Name of Salomé* by Julia Alvarez, a novel based on actual events and people read by both book clubs, prompt

The experienced teacher group picks up the gender issue that permeates Salomé’s subversive move to open a school for girls in a foreign dominated and strongly patriarchal culture. Education for girls run counter to established patterns of control and submission (Freire, 1970) and disturbs those in charge. The women respond:

Mary: Here it is: [reading from the book] “Their father did not believe in education for his girls who might learn how to read and write love letters.” [Lesley: Where is that?] Page 265—that whole section is on literacy . . .

Lesley: To write love letters. Definitely. I read that this morning, too. It's so tied up together. Why do you not want women to get an education? Women who do learn will learn about themselves. They will find all sorts of things about themselves.

The teachers engage in considerable dynamic discourse on Salomé's "teaching to transgress" (hooks, 1994) and on how she prepares her girls to resist the submission they have been carefully and clearly taught to accept. They suggest that Salomé begins to unravel the repression and relocate the practice of freedom as she teaches new ways for the girls to identify themselves and their actions by assuming an unaccustomed power for transforming their own lives (Belsey, 1993; Bhola, 1994; Garnston & Wellman, 1994; Horton & Freire, 1990; Shore, 2000).

The discussion occurs as American troops have begun their invasion of Afghanistan and stories of the plight of women begin to erupt in the media. Not surprisingly, the teachers find parallels between the plight of Salomé and her girls and the dramatic events of the post 9-11 world. On the critical issue of women's education, Lesley suggests: "That's what this war is about—women, and the right to an education, and all the issues of sexuality tied up in all of that stuff." Surprised by Lesley's hypothesis of the source of the issues resulting in the War in Afghanistan, Louise asks: "You think that's what this war is about?"

Lesley: Oh yeah. It's about women. This war, at its deepest core, is about the rights of women.

Louise: In terms of its purpose and its intent?

Lesley: In terms of its deep meaning, it's how much freedom do you give women. All the rest of this stuff is just surface stuff. [Mary: Economics too.] It's economics too, but all of those things are the rational. The irrational, deep archetypal core is the war between the patriarchy and the matriarchy. This is the showdown between whether women should be doing what we're doing here, or not.

Louise: You think that's in the consciousness of—

Lesley: Not the consciousness—it's not a conscious thing. It's deep, a gut thing.

Louise: I think one of the results of the situation [in Afghanistan] is that the increased publicity around the problem of women, will help the cause, will put the cause in the forefront. To say the gender issue is at the very core [of the war], I don't know. I think there *is* a justice issue. It is a core issue for us. When we hear about it and learn about it, we can't turn away from it. But—

Lesley: That's what's happening in the world today. That's what this war is about: Women, and their right to an education . . . That's why the war is fought there. The reason that Osama bin Laden and the Afghans—their *raison d'être* right now—is the suppression of women's rights.

Louise challenges Lesley's assumption that educating women has become more urgent and evident since 9/11 or that the war is being fought on the issue of women's rights to education. Louise suggests that Lesley's feminist perspective fails to account for the benefits of keeping the gender issue in the national consciousness through the stories of the Afghani women. Differences in perspectives between Louise and Lesley emerge

regularly and strongly particularly on the issue of gender. These tensions, however, *In the Name of Salomé* points to political and social injustices in a way that connect us to our own places as women and teachers.

In the novice teacher group, a discussion emerges on the partisan practice of women's repression in the book as it presents an obvious contradiction: the men openly resist foreign domination, working prodigiously toward national independence and at the same time, dominate and control the women. The women are colonized twice—as members of a colonized state and as women in a patriarchal culture. Rosemary initiates a dialogue on the inequities:

There is that scene when they are at some meeting and the women can't talk unless they're asked to by the men.

Melanie: Oh yes! In the beginning, when they have Salomé there. They bow down to her, but she can't even talk.

Rosemary: Exactly, exactly, she can't even talk.

Melanie: What a contradiction.

Evelyn: She's young. She's young. I wrote here [in my reading log] about the whole thing about her being very young, virginal.

Melanie: She was 17, I think, or something like that. [Rosemary: Yeah, she was ridiculously young.]

Evelyn: When she goes to one of her first conferences after her father dies, Pancho goes to her and walks across and brings her to the podium, and *he*

recites—Is that the one you’re talking about? [Mary: Yes] [Rosemary: Yeah] He recites her poem. Hello!

Expectations and beliefs about “appropriate behavior” and roles were indelibly etched into the hegemonic, sanctioned patriarchal practices. The irony and contradiction has not escaped these teachers.

As time passes in the book club, the novice teachers become increasingly able to take steps to examine the larger (in this case, gender) issues. Kerri reads from her reflection on gender during an interview (2003):

It can’t be denied that women share a world that needs to be discussed and explored together. The book club gave me an opportunity to hear and to speak of my experience as a woman, as a woman teaching, and as a female reader. We often found similar threads in our lives and in our characters’ lives that invited deep and meaningful discussion of our lives and experiences. (Survey, 2004)

The fact remains that while great gains for women have been made, women teachers continue to encounter inequities and silencing that, if not addressed (and redressed), will needlessly perpetuate the inequalities around equity and partnership of all teachers (Acker, 1995; Apple, 1985; Kahn, 2004; LeBlanc, Kohl, & Witty, 1996; Grumet & McCoy, 2000; Pagano, 1990; Robertson, 1992).

### **Educational importance of the study**

This study explored the issue of how women teachers construct their teacher knowledge and epistemologies in learning communities where stories play a central role. Narrative texts and experiences served as heuristic, explanatory devices for understanding, shaping

knowledge and informing and reforming teachers' epistemologies. Recent work building on self-directed teacher learning in social and cultural contexts (Clark, 2001; Liebermann & Miller, 1999; Sumara, 1996; Wenger, 1998) points to the interplay of teacher voices, epistemologies, and content knowledge to both challenge and reshape existing knowledge (Clark, 2001; Brunner, 1994; Kooy, 2006a; Vygotsky, 1992).

The intersection of women teachers, stories, and the book club forges a particularly salient context for this study. Teaching and book clubs have traditionally been regarded as women's work and women's play, respectively (Pagano, 1990; Long, 2003). Neither has been adequately represented in mainstream educational research literature. This undermining and overlooking has significant impact on the profession and the women who populate it. Over the course of the study, the issue of single-gendered book clubs often arose in the discussions. The women teachers grew to feel strongly about maintaining a women's only policy. Men, they insisted, would change things, make the ethos less stable—a perception echoed by the members of both groups. They often referred to the book club as a “safe” place, a haven, a repository, and their peers as authentic colleagues and friends—a bonded community of women teachers (Grumet, 1988; Kooy, 2006a, in press; Long, 2003).

Indeed, the women talked and wrote movingly of how their knowledge changed and is changing as their lives move forward. The interdependence, being part of a common and shared endeavour, provides the strength to change. The *interdiscourse* of the book clubs gave the women a brand new text of strong, nurturing, independent women.

Through these experiences, they can find and assert their own positions, subjectivities—distinct from those of their fathers, husbands, brothers and male teachers (Kooy, 2006a).

While the teachers regularly repeatedly confirmed the power of the book club to support and challenge their ways of thinking and being as teachers, the question remains: How do teacher identities, praxis, and most importantly, the capacities and capabilities for transformative practices in their respective schools and classrooms (Freire, 1970, 1997; hooks, 1994, 2003) make their way from teacher development to teacher practice? The work begun here has led to new inquiries to address the nature of professional, teacher directed learning experiences as they inform professional knowledge and practices in schools (Kooy, SSHRC, 2006-2009). The novice teacher group, now in their seventh year of teaching, is exploring the relationship between professional knowledge and how that informs the ways small communities of learning are established in their individual schools.

This group provided an unexpected and surprising result in this study; that is, novice teachers need to be included and can, from their induction, begin to examine and revise their knowledge in the company of others—particularly those also new to the profession. This is a startling observation. While ample evidence exists of the benefits of mentor support during induction, little, if any research exists that novice teachers benefit from such experiences. Yet, the teachers in this group repeatedly confirmed that their learning in the book club was changed, stimulated, and provoked. They could openly express themselves (“I had a complete meltdown in my English class this week”) and work their way into the epistemological issues they could neither articulate or find the political space, time or ways to discuss with mentors (available to three of the six women in year

one). What they needed and found was a place to tell the stories of their teaching, to explain their lives, and in a supportive and challenging social context, alter their personal, practical knowledge and build their capacities to improve student learning.

From this study, I believe it is safe to say that through multiple stories and interactive dialogues, both experienced and novice teachers altered their teaching theories and epistemologies by finding ways to for learning life literacies in teacher book clubs. In light of convincing evidence that teachers who actively stimulate their professional development (lifelong learning) are better, more skilled teachers who, in turn, improve learning in their classrooms (Borko, 2004; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Clark, 2001), this byproduct of the book clubs is worth pursuing in more detail (Kooy, 2006). Teacher directed professional development as described in the study moves toward *re-*professionalizing the profession (Jensen, Foster & Eddy, 1997). Self-directed and sustained teacher groups cannot be readily overlooked in the search for effective professional teacher development.

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