

## Beginning teacher attrition: a question of identity making and identity shifting

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*(Received 12 February 2010; final version received 28 April 2011)*

While there is discrepancy about the actual percentage of early career teachers that leave teaching in their first five years, one consistent discovery in a number of countries is that attrition is high for early career teachers. I became curious about early career teacher attrition as I watched colleagues leave the profession that they thought was a lifelong calling. In order to inquire into this phenomenon, I moved through a three-stage research process. First, I engaged in writing a series of stories about my experiences as a beginning teacher. Using autobiographical narrative inquiry, I then inquired into the stories in order to retell them looking for resonances across the stories. Secondly, I conducted a review of the literature, analyzing the studies to identify how the problem of early career teacher attrition was conceptualized. I identified two dominant problem frames: a problem frame situated within the individual and a problem frame situated in the context. Lastly, I offered a different conceptualization of the phenomenon of early career teacher attrition that draws on my autobiographical narrative inquiry and the literature review. I frame the problem of teacher attrition, not as a personal or a contextual problem frame, but as a problem of teacher identity making and identity shifting.

**Keywords:** early career; teacher attrition; identity; conceptualizations; narrative inquiry

### Introduction

My curiosity about beginning teachers' experiences is grounded in my experiences surrounding teacher education as well as my three years of teaching. My interest was sparked by watching some beginning teachers live out what appeared to be stories of success in their new *real world* positions, while others lived out stories that enabled them to leave the profession they thought to be their lifelong calling. I wondered what experiences shaped beginning teachers' careers. Why do so many beginning teachers leave the profession?<sup>1</sup> I am not the first to wonder about this phenomenon, but the wonders seem particularly urgent as the numbers of beginning teachers who leave in certain countries continue (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Macdonald, 1999; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) to increase.

In order to inquire into this phenomenon, I moved through a three-stage research process. Using autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I first engaged in writing a series of stories about my experiences as a

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beginning teacher. Through narrative inquiry, experience is studied through explorations of the personal/social, temporality, and place. The narrative inquirer's gaze shifts (inward) from personal feelings, hopes, and dispositions, to (outward) existential conditions, to temporality (backward and forward), and finally, to a consideration of place 'which attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 51). These three dimensions constitute the metaphorical/conceptual space in which narrative research into lived experience operates. I then inquired into the stories in order to retell them looking for resonances across the stories. Secondly, I conducted a review of the literature, analyzing the studies to identify how the problem of early career teacher attrition was conceptualized. Lastly, I offered a different conceptualization of the phenomenon of early career teacher attrition that draws on my autobiographical narrative inquiry and the literature review.

In the review of the literature, there are different conceptualizations at work in accounting for why beginning teachers leave teaching: some draw on notions of the individual, such as burnout, being described as 'a perceived state of physical and emotional exhaustion, which develops into negative attitudes towards students' (Shamer & Jackson, 1996, p. 29), while other conceptualizations draw on contextual problems, including lack of administrative support, student discipline, absence of collegiality, the status of teachers, and salary (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006; Macdonald, 1999; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Much research into beginning teacher attrition works from a view that beginning teachers develop 'a growing awareness of the[se] less exciting realities of teaching [that] can be followed by feelings of ineffectiveness, loneliness, and alienation from the profession' (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler 2005, p. 38). Looking inward to conceptualize the problem as something within the individual or looking outward to conceptualize the problem as situated in the context are both important frames. However, working from recent work on narrative understandings of teacher identity, I propose to frame the problem as one of teacher identity making and identity shifting in order to understand the experiences of beginning teacher attrition.

### **Moving in to a new landscape**

The phone rang. I looked at the call display. It was the school board<sup>2</sup> that had hired me in April 2006. Now in August 2006 I had still not learned where, or what, I was teaching. I answered the phone and spoke with the man who would be my new principal. I learned I would start the next day at a junior high school. 'Swing by the school as soon as possible', he said. A graduate of a program in secondary teacher education, I was a little disappointed my first job was teaching in a junior high, but looking at the map, I had a feeling of relief; the school was only a ten-minute drive from my new house. Driving to school, I was conscious about what I was wearing. In a hurry to leave the house, I could not find dress shoes. The shoes even slightly appropriate were my golf shoes. Perhaps the principal would not notice and, if he did notice, maybe it would be a good icebreaker.

Walking in<sup>3</sup> I noted that the school was not what I expected. It was dingy, and the ceiling lights gave off a yellowish glow. I tried to walk softly so my golf shoes would not click. However, there was an excitement in my step that could not be silenced. The principal was waiting in his office. Welcoming me, he handed me my teaching assignment, an assignment it took me a while to comprehend. The longer I looked, the more overwhelmed I became. The schedule read: grade 7 Physical Education, grade 8

Physical Education, grade 7 Health, grade 8 Health, grade 7 Social Studies, grade 8 Social Studies, Grade 7 Language Arts, Grade 8 Language Arts, Grade 7 Computers. I noticed immediately I was teaching Language Arts and Computers; two courses I knew little about. I kept these worries to myself. I knew beginning teachers' positions often did not coincide with what they wanted to teach or were prepared to teach.

As we toured the school I heard little of what the principal said. All I could think about was the clicking of my golf shoes, and how I was going to teach nine different courses. At the end of the tour, we visited my first classroom. As the door opened I saw desks, a white board, a computer, four bare walls and no windows. I thought it looked desolate. The principal said, 'Don't worry. You have a few days to make it your own'. I wondered, 'How do I make it my own?'

Inquiring into my initial experience as a beginning teacher, I noted feelings and concerns. Inwardly, I felt I had no idea what I was getting into. I had expected time to plan, as I had been hired almost six months before I was to start. I began to realize that I had to prepare for nine different classes. I wondered how I would succeed. Later I learned the staff referred to my assignment as a *dog's breakfast*. As a newcomer to the province and city, this place did not feel familiar; the unknown made the transition more complex. Although I entered this landscape confident, the unknown space began to shift my 'stories to live by'<sup>4</sup>; I started to feel like an outsider.

In looking backward to the stories, I was telling as I entered that first teaching position, I am reminded of what I expected. My forward-looking story composed prior to that first day (Nelson, 2001), that is, my imagined story of who I would be as a teacher, was a teacher in a large school, one resembling my high school. My imagined place had large pyramid steps in the middle of the common area, with lots of windows and sunshine. I would teach physical education, creating a program to enable students to be committed to healthy active lifestyles. I had recited my introduction speech to my imagined students in the mirror numerous times, and planned activities to get to know them. I had wondered how they would respond. I imagined myself in front of the class confidently telling stories about why I became a teacher, and how much I was looking forward to working with them. Looking back, now, I see my excitement stemmed from the opportunity to work alongside students.

In seeing my first classroom, I was astounded by how bare it was. This shock awakened me to the realization that teachers are responsible for organizing their classrooms. In this moment, my forward-looking story of who I imagined myself becoming was interrupted. I was in a junior high school and had just learned I would teach only two physical education classes; physical education was my major and my passion. The school was small, somewhat dim lit and the only windows resided in the outside doors; they let in little sunlight. My concerns went quickly from building relationships with students, to wondering about how I was going to organize, plan, and teach nine different classes.

Shifting forward through those first days, I realized that many of my imagined stories, those stories I had been telling myself of who I was and who I was going to be, did not match the stories that beginning teachers were expected to live within this landscape. For beginning teachers, the dominant institutional narrative in which they find themselves as a character is one of trying to keep their heads above water. Often experienced teachers, when telling of their first years of teaching, tell horror stories with plot lines of long hours, paper work, and having to make it on their own. If beginning teachers make it through their first year, they see it as a major

accomplishment (Renard, 2003). Beginning teachers often start their careers in positions no experienced teacher would want. Patterson (2005) refers to this as hazing, a situation where the least experienced teachers are not privy to the same amenities as the experienced. Renard (2003) describes the pecking order in schools, noting experienced teachers see beginning teachers at the bottom of the food chain. One of my colleagues told me he did not even try to remember a teacher's name until they had a full-time contract.

I wonder how beginning teachers' forward-looking stories, the ones beginning teachers imagine, shape their identities, their stories to live by, as they enter new landscapes? What happens when those forward-looking stories and the school stories bump at the borderlands?<sup>5</sup>

That night I did not sleep a wink, and the next morning I was up early and ready to go. I carefully put on dress shoes, but my heels still clicked on the floor with excitement. The first day was a professional development day. I showed up early to set up my room. As I walked out of my room I met a colleague who welcomed me and then kind of laughed. 'Where are you from?', he asked. When I responded 'Saskatchewan',<sup>6</sup> he broke into extremely loud laughter. When another teacher walked in, I assumed the conversation would end. To my surprise, the laughing and the conversation continued. 'What are you teaching?' he asked curiously. I responded, 'A little bit of everything, but I am most interested in teaching physical education, as that is my passion'. He laughed again, then became serious. While his words have faded, the message remains. The school had just let two good young teachers go, and he could not believe they hired me out of Saskatchewan. 'There are', he said angrily, 'many good young teachers in Alberta who are taking part time jobs because nothing is available'. He walked away shaking his head.

I remember little else from this day except the sense of pressure to perform in order to prove I deserved this position. The excited sound of my shoes clicking on the floor was dampened. I began to wonder if the forward-looking story I envisioned was idealistic in the *real world* of beginning teachers. My stories of who I would be as a teacher in my first school were interrupted.

Had this experience happened in a place in which I was comfortable, perhaps it might have shaped my stories to live by differently. Had I known the upset individual's stories, I may have responded differently. However, as a newcomer to this landscape, I was not aware of the plot lines that threaded their way through the school story.

'Teachers on landscapes learn how to act and think in appropriate ways, ways that are sanctioned by others positioned in the conduit' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995, p. 158). New teachers are not only new to teaching, but also they are new to the school they are entering, and lack an understanding of the school context (Heller, 2004). Beginning teachers know little about the stories that live in those contexts or landscapes. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) borrow Geertz's metaphor of a parade to describe the constant movement and changes on school landscapes.

Their image of a parade was not of a tightly orchestrated, carefully staged or showy parade but was more of a local small community parade-a parade in which everybody participates, entering or leaving at different places and times as the parade meanders in a spontaneous way across an expanse or field. (Clandinin, Downy, & Huber, 2009, p. 146)

Beginning teachers, like other newcomers, enter this parade as it is in progress. As they observe others in the parade, as they tentatively walk along, they begin to understand where they fit in.

I arrived at the school early, and left late. I did this partly because I had a lot to get done, and partly to ensure others knew I was working hard. It was a way to let staff know I was committed to the school. I asked few questions during the first few weeks. I entered the school hired from outside of district. If I had too many questions, I might be seen as inefficient or unknowing. In the classroom, I was so concerned about keeping up with curriculum, lesson plans, and assessment, I lost sight of what I felt was most important, relationships.

Perhaps, I was living a cover story<sup>7</sup> (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 14). Inside the school walls and around colleagues, I was upbeat and positive. Had I been wearing my golf shoes, they would have been clicking. However, the cover story blanketed the many questions I wanted to ask. I was overwhelmed with trying to live a story of teaching that was coherent with the forward-looking story of the teacher I had imagined I would be.

My experiences seem congruent with the experiences of beginning teachers as they are portrayed in the literature. The fear of asking questions and letting administrators and other teachers know that they do not know something is a major issue for new teachers (Weasmer & Woods, 2000). Kutcy and Schulz (2006) found beginning teachers were frustrated they were unable to work with students in the ways they expected they would be able to. Barnes (1993) found pressures to conform to what other teachers were already doing also caused frustration for beginning teachers (as cited in Kutcy & Schulz, 2006, p. 78). As I read the literature and thought about my own stories, I wondered what happens to beginning teachers' stories to live by when their stories are covered over or silenced by the stories of the school? How does this silencing of one's stories shape their future stories to live by on professional landscapes?

As I wrote about my own experiences as a beginning teacher and laid them alongside the representations in the research literature, I noted similarities. In what follows I use the stories of my experiences as a beginning teacher as a way to narratively read the ways beginning teacher attrition has been conceptualized.

### **Conceptualizing teacher attrition**

Data related to teacher attrition is nuanced and there is discrepancy about the percentage of beginning teachers who leave teaching in their first five years (from 5 to 50%), 'one very stable finding is that attrition is high for young teachers' (Guarino et al., 2006, p. 10). High rates of early career teacher attrition create a significant economic strain on the system (Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008; Macdonald, 1999; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In USA, over two billion dollars are spent each year replacing teachers that leave the profession (Alliance, 2005, p. 2). While this amount is not all spent on early career teacher leavers, research shows that early leavers make up a significant number of teachers leaving the profession (Guarino et al., 2006; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005).

Within the literature from countries with high early career attrition rates, there are two main ways that teacher attrition is conceptualized: one way to frame the problem situates the focus on the individual teacher, that is, the focus is on the

person. The second framing is to look at the organizational context of beginning teachers, that is, with a focus on the context. Having said that, data on attrition are complex, nuanced, and difficult to access accurately. There are complexities that may be influenced by multiple contextual differences (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006). Beginning teachers graduate from diverse teacher education programs which offer different conceptualizations and philosophies. Alternate programs such as Teach For America and Teach First in the UK offer different routes into education. The multiplicity of teacher education programs offered makes it difficult to generalize how teacher education shapes beginning teachers' experiences from different institutions.

### **Individual conceptualizations**

Existing research on teacher attrition has generally focused on the individual characteristics of those that leave the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Strunk & Robinson, 2006). One prominent individual conceptualization is based on individual burnout.

#### **A. Burnout**

The concept of burnout, used since the early 70s, has many different definitions (Gold, 1984). Maslach (1978, 1982) defined professional burnout as a syndrome of bodily and mental exhaustion, in which the worker becomes negative towards those with whom they work, and develops a negative sense of self-worth. A long list of factors that cause burnout for beginning teachers ranges from excessive paperwork, to lack of administrative support, to role conflict, to unclear expectations (Anhorn, 2008; Schlichte et al., 2005). Although research alludes to organizational factors that cause burnout, the label of burnt-out frames beginning teachers in a particular, and frequently, negative way.

Seeing beginning teachers as burning out suggests they did not survive and suggests that the problem of teacher attrition is situated within the individual teacher; 'they could not hack it in the real world of teaching, and became exhausted'; 'they should have swum, instead of sunk'. Because burnout is framed around an individual's internal response, it suggests there is something wrong with the individual. Framing the problem of early career attrition in this way suggests we need to address the problem with better teacher education programs, through which we create individuals who are resilient, and will not succumb to the rigors involved with teaching. Such a framing may suggest, for example, that universities should continue to canvas for psychologically stronger candidates in teacher education programs. Given this framing, the high numbers of beginning teachers who are leaving suggests we are graduating teachers who cannot handle the pressures.

Although resilience is often seen as an inherent trait or characteristic of an individual, other socially constructed alternatives do exist (Johnson et al., 2010; Le Cornu, 2009). In these alternative conceptualizations, supportive communities can foster the development of resilience in beginning teachers and perhaps move the onus of being resilient away from the individual, beginning teacher, to the learning community within which they work.

As I left the school on the first Friday, I felt exhausted. My eyes burned, my head hurt, my body was sore from participating with the students in physical education, and

I was grouchy from lack of sleep. As I left the school, curriculum guides in hand, I wondered how I would handle the demands of being a full time teacher. I wondered how my imagined story could have been so far off. Assessment plans, literacy plans, management issues sidetracked me, and I was struggling to make connections with students. My shoes, once clicking, were now dragging as I made my way to my vehicle and began what seemed to be a long drive home.

Inquiring into this story, I realize I could have been perceived as a teacher who was becoming burntout. There were many days like this one. Juggling teaching and coaching took up all of my time. I was being stretched in different directions. I wanted inquiry-based assignments that engaged students, but it was less time consuming to give students already produced handouts. I began to feel like I was the teacher I had sworn I would never become. I felt like I was selling my students and myself short. My excitement for teaching was waning.

### ***B. Teacher demographics***

Other conceptualizations of teacher attrition are also framed around individual teacher characteristics. Research suggests that age, gender, and ethnic background are related to teacher attrition. Attrition rates are higher for younger, less experienced teachers (Guarino et al., 2006). One explanation for this finding is that some beginning teachers of today's generation do not look at teaching as a lifelong career (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). This may suggest today's teachers' values differ from previous generations, just as today's students' values differ from previous generations. This is only one explanation, Borman and Dowling (2008), provide another possibility in their meta-analytic and narrative review. They cite Kirby and Grissmer's (1991) theory related to human capital and suggest a link between the amount of capital invested in the profession and beginning teacher attrition. Following Kirby and Grissmer's theory (1991), beginning teachers may have less social capital invested in teaching and may be more likely to leave as they may be able to find other employment opportunities that pay as much, or more, than teaching. This equal transfer of social capital to another profession may not be true for older, more experienced teachers. Other theories suggest that younger teachers are more apt to start families, and therefore leave the profession more often<sup>8</sup> (OECD, 2005, p. 177).

Borman and Dowling (2008) found females have a higher attrition rate than males. Gurarino et al. (2006) found minority teachers are more likely to stay in the profession. The majority of beginning teachers leaving the profession are younger Caucasian females. This focus on the individual teacher's age, gender, and ethnicity frames the problem as situated in the individual and does not take into account contextual issues.

### ***C. Quality teachers***

Framing the problem of attrition by looking at educational experiences and ability is another framing in terms of individual teachers' characteristics. Guarino et al. (2006) literature review noted four studies that showed higher ability students chose not to go in to education. Murnane and Olson (1990) found teachers with higher academic ability were also more likely to leave teaching careers early. Other researchers (Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000) noted it is the best and brightest new

teachers who appear, most likely, to leave. There is particular concern about the impact on the teaching profession and on the student performance, given that ‘there is a growing consensus among researchers and educators that the single most important factor in determining student performance is the quality of his or her teachers’ (Alliance, 2005, p. 1). Conceptualizing teacher attrition in this way again puts the onus on individuals’ characteristics.

## Contextual conceptualizations

### A. Discourses of support

Lack of support is often listed as a cause of beginning teacher attrition (Flores & Day, 2006; Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 1999; Schlichte et al., 2005; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Whether it is a lack of administrative or staff support, an environment that promotes individuality seems to be a major concern when looking at beginning teachers who leave the profession (Anhorn, 2008).

I began to second-guess taking this job. The pressure to perform continued and I continued to not ask questions. I did not want my new colleagues to see that I did not know what to put on my walls, or how to organize my desktop. I felt that if I wanted to survive, I was going to have to do it on my own.

While the above is an account of my context, similar school contexts promote individualism and competitiveness that lead to feelings of isolation (Anhorn, 2008; Flores & Day, 2006; Schlichte et al., 2005). Isolation is one of the main reasons for teachers to leave the profession (Heller, 2004). The dominant story of the teacher is that they are knowledgeable and knowing, however, ‘the condition of not knowing is common for beginning teachers’ (Corcoran, 1981, p. 21). In my story, I tell of being hesitant to ask questions of my colleagues or of my administration in the early days. I wanted to portray myself as an expert, certain teacher, someone who was competent, and more than capable of handling *real teacher situations*. I wanted the staff and principal to notice my golf shoes clicking.

Even as I lived and told cover stories, I knew the principal was formally evaluating me and knew that informally the rest of the staff were making their own judgments. Like beginning teachers within the literature, the isolation caused by the school context formed a barrier between my colleagues and me.

### B. Living with students

Issues with student discipline are also seen as a cause of beginning teacher attrition (Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 1999; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Kutcy and Schulz (2006) found students’ attitudes towards learning were a major frustration for beginning teachers. Many beginning teachers aspire to make a difference in students’ lives. However, the research (Schlichte et al., 2005) suggests beginning teachers learn quickly that student discipline problems and student work ethics prevent them from doing so. As a beginning teacher, I expected to make connections with students. However, the mandated curriculum and the temporal and spatial structures of schooling allowed me little time to build relationships. The challenge of building relationships with students, while trying to *cover* curriculum and set acceptable expectations for student behavior, was not something I anticipated. My forward-looking story was one in which I came to teach, to shape, to impact, and to live



along side students. This story was written over by a story of teaching where I spent my time trying to manage students and cover curriculum. The interruption of my imagined story and the lived story created a moral dilemma. This dilemma and other challenges lead me, like beginning teachers portrayed in the research literature, to experience times of frustration.

### ***C. Other contextual conceptualizations***

Along with lack of support from administrators and student discipline problems, beginning teachers also left teaching because they were not involved in school decisions and were paid low salaries (Ingersoll, 2001).

During my first few days I attended many meetings that pertained to the year start up. I had little to contribute. However, I was excited when I got an email about an upcoming physical education meeting. I readied my unit plans for activities I thought we might implement, and activities I thought other PE teachers might be interested in. I had created a Tawkra unit, an Eastern sport that includes a bit of volleyball, and a bit of hacky sack, as well as an ultimate Frisbee unit. I took these two units to the meeting with a confidence I did not have in the other meetings. I waited for the perfect time to introduce my units. Near the end of the meeting the PE department head asked if there were other questions or concerns. I said I had two units I had taught in the past and that I did not see them on the yearly plan. I suggested the ultimate Frisbee unit might fit nicely into the fitness unit planned for September. Before I finished my final sentence, another colleague stopped me. 'It's your first year here. Don't worry about re-inventing the wheel. You need to keep your head above the water and try to survive'.<sup>9</sup>

Narratively inquiring into this story, I look temporally and inwardly to attend to the excitement and confidence I carried with me into the meeting. It was a meeting that I finally felt I could contribute to. The other meetings consisted of people talking about things and issues I knew little about. When the comment was made that 'I needed to worry about surviving' something clicked internally. It was at this point that I realized my opinion was not valued. I was storied as a 'not knower' (Belenky, Clinchy, Tarule, & Goldberger, 1986) on this landscape. The knowledge I embodied was not seen as important to these more experienced teachers. I wanted to be a part of the school, and a part of the decision-making process, especially in the areas about which I was passionate. Beginning teachers who feel as if they do not have control over their own classroom or school decisions tend to be more frustrated with their teaching positions (Ingersoll, 2001). Once again I entered a situation with my golf shoes clicking, and left with them dragging along the floor.

Salary is also often talked about when discussing beginning teacher attrition. Guarino et al. (2006) noted that, from their review of recent empirical literature, higher salaries were a deterrent to teachers leaving the profession. Having said that, there are also studies that indicate that the salary increases needed to actually decrease beginning teacher attrition are not an economically viable solution (Imazeki, 2005).

In laying my stories alongside beginning teacher attrition literature, it becomes apparent that my experiences may be categorized, or made to fit, into the current conceptualizations. However, in doing so my stories become decontextualized, and my lived experiences are not deeply explored. I began to wonder about other ways to frame beginning teacher attrition.

### **Bumping stories: from shifting roles to shifting identities**

I began to ponder framing beginning teacher attrition as a problem in identity making and identity shifting. As I shifted my focus of beginning teacher attrition to a question of narrative conceptions of identity, I began to see beginning teacher attrition from a different vantage point.<sup>10</sup> Flores and Day (2006) explored how this shift in role may shape beginning teachers identities and bring us closer to framing teacher attrition as a question that involves identity making and shifting.

My beginning story denoted the surprise and shock of my first few days of school. As a beginning teacher I entered the school landscape living stories that were filled with expectations of how things would be. Many studies emphasize the shock that comes from going, from the role of student to the role of teacher (Flores & Day, 2006). Lortie's (1975) theory of 'apprenticeship of observation' notes the number of hours students spend being socialized as students, and how this falsely shapes their perceptions of what it is to be a teacher. A common task of teacher educators is preparing beginning teachers to negotiate the role shift from student to teacher. In teacher education, we set beginning teachers up to expect they will be positioned differently in school environments, that is, as teacher rather than student. However, this role shift may be only part of what is at work when beginning teachers begin to negotiate their new landscapes.

Beginning teachers start teaching with preconceived ideas of who they might be as a teacher. These preconceived notions include how they might live out staff relationships, relationships with students, relationships with subject matter, and relationships with parents. As noted earlier, Schlichte et al. (2005) believe that when the realities of teaching become apparent to beginning teachers the conflict between their ideal stories and their lived stories may result in them becoming isolated and frustrated.

Flores and Day's study on beginning teachers' experiences and identity showed that their participants began to live a story of 'strategic compliance' (2006, p. 229). What Flores and Day describe as a story of strategic compliance is a kind of cover story that allows beginning teachers to conform to what is being done on their school landscapes; this compliance or cover story enables them to fit in, and to live alongside others on the school landscape without creating social tension. Although this cover story or strategic compliance may help to avoid social tension, the dilemma, or internal tension – that is created by living out this conflicted story – is more than a shifting or shaping of role but is a shaping of the individual's identity, his/her stories to live by.

Flores and Day (2006) also found that this compliance was not only to instruction, but also to the attitudes and values of being a teacher. They found that when beginning teachers entered the new landscape they were excited and enthusiastic and their metaphoric golf shoes were clicking. However, they soon began to live their cover stories of strategic compliance; they became socialized by the dominant school story. As this happened, a 'sense of giving up' became apparent in the beginning teachers' stories (p. 229) and their shoes began to drag. I wonder how this conflict of stories shapes beginning teachers' stories to live by, their identities. I wonder how they negotiate these experiences and how this shapes their forward-looking stories of teaching?

**Attending to shifting stories to live by**

Identity means different things to different people. I adopted a narrative understanding of identity and follow Clandinin and Connelly's work on teacher identity as stories to live by. For Clandinin and Connelly, stories to live by is a phrase that brings together teacher knowledge and teacher context. For them, teacher knowledge is 'personal practical knowledge, knowledge, which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person's being. Its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of a person's experiential history, both professional and personal' (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362). They conceptualize school context in terms of a professional knowledge landscape. The professional knowledge landscape is composed of relationships among people, places, and things, and is both a moral and intellectual landscape (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995). The phrase 'stories to live by' is 'given meaning by the narrative understanding of knowledge and context. Stories to live by are shaped by such matters as secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling and teachers' cover stories' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4). When we inquire in to our past, present, and future experiences with a narrative lens, we are able to begin to understand how our stories to live by have come to be and how they are expressed or lived out in our practices.

'From a teacher's vantage point, knowledge is entwined with identity, stories to live by' (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 2). A narrative way of thinking about teacher identity speaks to the connection between a teacher's personal practical knowledge and the landscape, past and present, where teachers live and work (Clandinin et al., 2009). From this, we may understand that teachers' stories to live by are continually shaped by their knowledge, as well as by the stories of the professional landscapes on which they live and work on. Thus, each individual's story to live by is different, and shaped differently by his or her own personal experiences. 'Important to this way of thinking is an understanding of the multiplicity of each of our lives-lives composed around multiple plot lines' (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 2).

Earlier I wondered about my own forward-looking stories. As I think about the complexities of teaching I begin to wonder if other beginning teachers are able to step back and reimagine a shifted forward-looking story of who they might become as teachers, that is, new stories to live by. I wonder how they negotiate the disconnected stories, and interruptions within the midst of their shifting identities. Reading the literature through a narrative lens allows me to become awake to the importance of lived experience, and justifies looking at beginning teacher attrition from a different vantage point.

When I noted the bumping of stories during my first year, I began to shape my cover story to one that fit in with the school story, a story of strategic compliance (Flores & Day, 2006). It is often said that it is easier to do what has been done before. For me, as a beginning teacher, this was only partly true. Outwardly, it was easier to teach the textbook, use handouts, and diligently work through the mandated curriculum. However, inwardly, it was much harder for me to teach in this way. In abandoning my stories to live by, I also abandoned what brought me to education, that is, the students.

Through my experiences as a teacher, and my autobiographical narrative inquiry work, I have begun to frame beginning teacher attrition as a problem that compels inquiry into teacher identity making and identity shifting as a way to narratively understand the experiences of beginning teachers. In thinking in this way, I wonder

how the bumping of stories, the school stories, and the beginning teachers' stories to live by may shape their identities. How do beginning teachers negotiate their identities in the unfamiliar professional landscapes that they enter in to? Have those that left the profession early had their stories to live by shaped in ways that enabled them to leave the profession? Have those that stayed in the profession been able to sustain their stories to live by, their identities, in ways that allow them to continue to teach?

Looking at beginning teacher attrition, in this way, represents how important the lived experiences of each individual are and how important the stories are that bring beginning teachers to the profession. In recognizing 'teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, p. 25), their stories of their own experiences become important to understanding the bumping of plot lines. It is within the weaving, paralleling, and bumping of these school and personal plot lines that messiness becomes apparent. As individual beginning teachers, we carry with us stories of how things should be, may be, and could be. Our personal practical knowledge situates us within stories to live by that are continually shifting, shaping, and being negotiated.

An interesting thing happened as I read the literature through a narrative inquiry lens and autobiographically inquired in to my own lived experiences as a beginning teacher; I noticed that my stories could be squeezed into each conceptualization in a superficial way. What I am trying to convey is that when we sand the rough edges off stories of experience to fit them into dominant conceptualizations they are decontextualized (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011). The stories that brought us to teaching, and stories of our teacher education programs, are disregarded. Furthermore, the relational interconnections among the complex stories to live by and the personal and professional landscapes are lost.

In thinking about framing future research into teacher attrition as a problem of identity shifting and shaping, we may begin to see teachers' stories in a different way, that is, in a way that honors their personal lived experiences and allows their stories to stay rough around the edges.

It had been a long day. I had already observed seven student teachers in three different schools and provided written feedback to each of them. I was observing my last student teacher in the last period of the day, when the mentor teacher rolled his chair over to mine and with a large smile noted, 'You know it's invigorating to have a student teacher, I love watching them work through their anxiety, succeed, interact with students, and learn new things. The best part is how excited they are about becoming a teacher. I think when they leave, I am revived, and so much more appreciative of how important my job is as a teacher'. In hearing the mentor's comment, I began to smile. I thought of the student teachers I was working with, and the thorough three page lesson plans they prepared. I thought of their patience when dealing with students who are deliberately trying to push their buttons. I thought of the student teacher who entered the cohort meeting pumping her fists in celebration, because her lesson ended right as the bell rang. I thought of the small victories each of them had already experienced on their journeys.<sup>11</sup>

In these thoughts I heard the echo of my clicking golf shoes and remembered the excitement I carried with me on my first day of teaching. As I made my way out of the school that day, I thought back to the mentor being revived by his student teacher, and wondered how, as a profession, we may embrace this excitement and newness.

## Notes

1. Early career teacher attrition rates across Canada are difficult to assess, as there are no large national studies. The research that has been done is in a number of provincial contexts. In Alberta, the site of this study, beginning teacher attrition is cause for concern. The percentage of beginning teachers leaving the profession in Alberta is similar to the percentage of teachers leaving in the USA and England. A recent study done by the Alberta Teachers Association confirms the numbers leaving, and researchers note that a number of those who have not left have intentions to leave in the near future (Alberta Teachers Association, 2010). While teacher attrition is a problem in countries such as the USA, and United Kingdom other countries such as Korea, Japan, and Italy do not have teacher attrition issues (OECD, 2005, p. 171). Therefore, early career teacher attrition is not a global phenomenon. There are, however, studies in the USA, England, and Australia. This study will add to work being done in Canada surrounding early career teacher attrition.
2. In order to provide anonymity, I addressed the school board as only that. The school board, located in a large urban district, has programs to meet the needs of the diverse student population.
3. The Grade 7–9 junior high school of approximately 500 diverse students is located in a middle-class neighborhood. The school offered second language classes, an honors program, and a behavioral program.
4. ‘Stories to live by’ is a phrase ‘given meaning by the narrative understanding of knowledge and context. Stories to live by are shaped by such matters as secret teachers’ stories, sacred stories of schooling and teachers’ cover stories’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4).
5. Borderlands are described as ‘those spaces that exist around borders where one lives with the possibility of multiple plot lines’ (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006, p. 59). Borderlands, used metaphorically, may be both internal and external. Borderlands are places of tension or struggle.
6. Alberta and Saskatchewan are neighboring Canadian provinces. Teacher education and certification are under provincial jurisdiction.
7. Cover stories enable teachers whose teacher stories are marginalized by whatever the current story of school is to continue to practice and to sustain their teacher stories. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25).
8. The research is not clear on how many of these individuals who leave for family reasons actually return to teaching at a later date.
9. This experience might be interpreted as an experienced colleague trying to protect or support me. However, as I reflected on my own embodied experience, this was not my interpretation of the event. While the individual may have been attempting to provide support, I felt as though my knowledge was not important. Researchers have inquired into the discrepancy between beginning teachers’ perceptions of support received and the perceptions of support provided by experienced teachers and administrators (Andrews, Gilbert, & Martin, 2006).
10. We review alternative conceptualizations of beginning teacher attrition (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009; Flores & Day, 2006; Olson, 2008; Rinke, 2006; Smethen, 2007; Sumsion, 2002) in Schaefer, Long & Clandinin, accepted).
11. I was a university facilitator when this experience took place. I was responsible for 12 student teachers and was expected to observe each of them once a week and to provide written feedback to each of them. At this time, I was a full-time graduate student. At research-intensive universities in Canada, this is not an unusual way for practicum supervision to be offered. This type of pre-service teacher support should certainly become part of the dialog surrounding beginning teacher attrition.

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