

Reformation of Storied Assumptions of Parents and Poverty

Debbie Pushor

University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker

Brock University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

We begin this article by introducing research into a *curriculum of parents* (Pushor, 2011, 2013). We then make visible how pre-service teachers' engagement in such a curriculum creates possibilities for teachers to actively resist deficit-based conceptualizations and to deepen their understanding of discourses of poverty and of representations of parents. The research is situated in Dewey's (1938) foundational conception of experience as education and in Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) explication of a narrative inquiry framework comprised of stories of experience. We take up Ciuffetelli Parker's (2013) notions – *narrative reveal*, *narrative revelation*, and *narrative reformation* – which we use to examine stories which illuminate one pre-service teacher's growing understanding of the complexities of teaching in a school community affected by poverty. Using Ciuffetelli Parker's narrative elements, we demonstrate how a teacher candidate, who experienced an explicit curriculum of parents, came to see parents affected by poverty as knowing and knowledgeable and as having an important place and voice in their children's schooling and education

Keywords: curriculum of parents; teacher education; poverty; narrative reveal, revelation, and reformation

Introduction

In this article, we outline the larger research study from which the focus of this paper is drawn, describing both the phenomenon of the study, "a curriculum of parents" (Pushor, 2011, 2013), and the research methodology of narrative inquiry. We then examine the experiences of one participant in the research study, a pre-service teacher, Cat, who was enrolled in an undergraduate course entitled, *Teaching and Learning in Community Education*. In order to situate Cat's experiences in a curriculum of parents, we provide, first, a picture of poverty in Canada and, second, a description of the curriculum with which she was engaged and its intended outcomes. As we turn to Cat's stories of experience, as she worked alongside parents in a community affected by poverty, we use Ciuffetelli Parker's (2012b) narrative elements – *narrative reveal*, *narrative revelation*, and *narrative reformation* – to make visible the significant shifts in Cat's beliefs and assumptions about working with parents affected by poverty

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Debbie Pushor, e-mail: debbie.pushor@usask.ca

and her awakening resistance to deficit-based conceptualizations. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the impact a conscious and deliberate curriculum of parents in pre-service teacher education can have, as well as the value of narrative methods which help reframe beginning teachers' perspectives about their work with parents and, in particular, parents living in contexts of poverty.

Parents and Schooling

Preparing New Teachers to Work with Parents

As a researcher and scholar in the area of parent engagement, and as a teacher educator who works with pre-service teachers, Pushor has been struck by the lack of coursework that focuses on preparing new teachers to work with parents.¹ In

¹ We use the term "parent" to represent any individual who is a caregiver in the life of a child, recognizing that many individuals play this important and specific role, both formally and informally. We speak of working with parents, rather than working with families, understanding "parent" as an inclusive term, and noting that there is a role within a family that is more of a caregiving role than other roles which are more

a review of representative English-instruction universities in Canada in 2009, with the intent of identifying undergraduate courses that offer a curriculum to pre-service teachers focused on working with parents, Pushor found no such courses (2009, 2011). Similarly, in the United States, Patte (2011) found that "...most college and teacher education programs do little to prepare teachers to understand and establish relations with families (Black, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Graue, 2005; Kirschenbaum, 2001; Martinez, Rodriguez, Perez, & Torio, 2005; Nieto, 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005)" (p. 144). Consequently, it is no surprise that in the 2005 survey of new teachers by the Metlife Foundation, new teachers reported that "engaging and working with parents was their greatest challenge" (Constantino, 2006). Given that an integral aspect of a teacher's role is to work with parents, from engaging in general conversations about curriculum and programming to working relationally with parents in support of their child's attainment of educational outcomes, it is critical that teachers are well-prepared for this part of their role. A curriculum of parents is a conscious and explicit curriculum intended to facilitate pre-service teachers' development of strength-based beliefs about parents, knowledge, and skills to work with them confidently and respectfully.

A Curriculum of Parents

Pushor's conceptualization of a curriculum of parents is situated in a Schwabian notion of curriculum. Schwab (1973) understood curriculum as comprised of four commonplaces: student, teacher, subject matter, and milieu. Three of these four commonplaces – student, teacher, and subject matter – are well-represented in teacher education curricula, in a vast array of courses which focus on mandated subject matter areas, teaching methods, teacher identity, diverse learners, assessment, and the like. In contrast, Schwab's notion of milieu is not well-represented, as noted in the research literature above. Schwab defined milieu in a broad way, including attention to the classroom and school milieu but expanding beyond that to

include attention to the milieu of family, community, and "particular groupings of religious, class, or ethnic genus" (p. 503). Schwab's (1973) understanding of milieu foregrounds relations between and among children, children and adults, and the various subgroups and communities in which children live and learn. In a curriculum of parents, teacher education coursework is designed to consciously reflect Schwab's understanding that children's learning is situated in the context of family and community. A curriculum of parents is constructed around a foundational premise:

"[W]here and with whom children live, and their social, cultural, religious and economic contexts are all significant to teaching and learning. [It presents] curriculum as a dynamic interplay between particular people--children, teachers, parents, family and community members--teaching and learning about particular things in a rich range of particular places. [It invites pre-service teachers to] take up Schwab's conceptualization of curriculum in [their] teaching lives and move beyond the milieu of [their] classrooms and schools to learn about children, their families, their hopes and dreams, and their lives". (Pushor, 2013, p. 10)

Without the opportunity to design designated undergraduate teacher education courses around a curriculum of parents, Pushor infuses and recommends that all teacher educators infuse a curriculum of parents in their pre-service courses. As pre-service teachers examine their stories of parents, discuss scholarly readings, and engage in experiences with or alongside parents, they are supported in making visible and interrogating their often unconscious beliefs and assumptions about parents and in moving to the development of explicit and articulated beliefs and assumptions which they are then challenged to reflect in their practices. We provide the following two descriptions of Pushor's incorporation of a curriculum of parents into existing teacher education courses as examples.

care receiving roles. It is with the individual(s) in the caregiving role, the "parents," that the school seeks to have a relationship.

"In my language arts methodology course, ... we talk about welcoming parents and building relationships with them, about engaging parents in their children's schooling experiences, and we explore how to make language arts programming decisions (both for the class and the student) collaboratively with parents. In one assignment, 'Knowing Students and Milieus', teacher candidates interact with a buddy student in the range of her/his day-to-day contexts to explore where learning may be happening for that child and what the learning may look like. The assignment involves multiple visits by the teacher candidate with her/his buddy - at school, at home, at places within the child's community where s/he spends time.² The purpose of the assignment is to have the teacher candidates come to know the child as an individual, a language learner and user, and as a member of a family and community.

In the community education course I teach ... my aim is to enhance teacher candidates' knowledge of and experience with community education. Among the breadth of course outcomes, my specified outcomes around a curriculum of parents include: developing a sound philosophy of parent engagement and understanding how to translate that philosophy into practice, developing an understanding of what parent knowledge is and how to use parent knowledge alongside teacher

knowledge in decisions regarding teaching and learning, re-conceptualizing the schooling of children in the context of family and community, and learning ways as an educator to step out of the school and into the community.

A significant element of this course is the teacher candidates' engagement in a 20 hour community education project. Situated in one school for the term, teacher candidates design their project alongside school staff. Their projects may have a single focus or they may involve a wealth of different activities. Teacher candidates' engagement with parents may range from such activities as conducting home visits with a community teaching assistant to facilitating a women's book club with mothers, from working alongside parents in extracurricular clubs or activities to co-planning a unit of instruction with a teacher and interested parents from that classroom. In this project, teacher candidates have the opportunity to interact directly with parents, developing a relationship with them, coming to understand the knowledge the parents hold, and gaining a stronger understanding of how the parents are engaged in their children's teaching and learning, whether it be on the landscape of school or outside of it". (Pushor, 2011, pp. 227-228)

Schwab (1973) asserted that relationships between the four curricular commonplaces were to be one of "coordination, not super-ordination or subordination" (p. 509). Typically, not only is the commonplace of milieus, as it pertains to family and community, subordinated; it is primarily omitted in teacher education programs. Such an omission, Schwab argued, is an omission of "a vital factor in educational thought and value" (p. 509). Through our examples of how Pushor infuses a curriculum of parents into her practice, demonstrating a coordination of the four curriculum commonplaces, we intend to create a critical conversation around the place and voice

²This assignment is done with the ethical approval, and following the ethical guidelines, of our College of Education. After parents receive an official invitation from me as the course instructor to have their child participate in our Knowing Students and Milieus project and they have given their signed consent, each teacher candidate meets with the parents and negotiates the parameters of their relationship with their child - when, where, and how often they will meet, for example.

of parents in their children's schooling and education.

Poverty and Schooling

Foundational to a curriculum of parents is the engagement of pre-service teachers in experiences and dialogue in which the students are called to make visible and to interrogate their often unconscious beliefs and assumptions about parents. This examination of their beliefs and assumptions becomes particularly critical when they are working with parents who are diverse. As Noguera (2011) noted, judgment, hostility, and deficit thinking are prevalent among teachers in regard to parents whose race, class, culture or language diverge from the white, middle class norm. Pre-service teachers, without personal or relational knowledge of parents who differ from them, frequently operate from a notion of "other."

"Constructions of 'otherness' occur through various discourses, wherever we are it and they are the other, in the definition of the essential versus the inessential, when one is the absolute and the other is the subject, and when we define the other relative to ourselves". (Madrid, in Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008, p. 2)

In Canada, where this research originates, poverty is at an all time high. The gap between low income and high income earners has increased and many teachers find themselves teaching in communities affected by poverty. It is critical to the wellbeing and success of children and families that they are not viewed as "the other" by teachers who enter their communities and that teachers resist deficit-based conceptualizations of students and their families and derogatory stereotypes of communities affected by poverty.

Child Poverty in Canada

Poverty is a multi-faceted issue requiring the attention of all educators and researchers in education. For more than 20 years, there have been many public and political statements which have supported the elimination of poverty in Canada. Despite these promises, the child poverty rate has not improved. One in seven

children lives in poverty in Canada. This statistic rises to one in four for Canada's fast growing Aboriginal people, and; immigrants face child poverty rates at more than two and a half times the general population (Campaign 2000, 2012). Ciuffetelli Parker (2013) explained:

"Forty-five percent of children living below the poverty line have at least one parent working full time, full year, yet the average low-income family lives \$7000 per year below the poverty line (poverty is defined as the low income cut off -LICO- line determined by Statistics Canada. LICOs vary by family size and by community size)".

In reality, while the economy has doubled in size, the incomes of families in the lowest financial categories have remained stagnate, resulting in a wider gap between wealthy and poor families (Campaign 2000, 2012). Incomes for the bottom 40% of workers keep falling while incomes for those in the middle have stood still or fallen too. The only significant gains have been made by the wealthiest income earners, a global trend which has seen consistency since the economic crash of 2009 (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011).

The result is a disappearing middle class that can be accounted for by four factors according to Canadian economist and researcher, Hulchanski (2011): cuts in affordable housing; labour market; social support cuts, and; discrimination factor where 80% of high income earners are white and the same percentage in low income are mixed race. The human face of these statistics is the prevalence of children living in poverty nationwide (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012a). This prevalence is critically serious for our children, our schools, our families, our communities, our nation, and it is representative of the dire reality of child poverty world-wide.

It is our human and citizenship responsibility to pay attention to the dire realities of poverty in order to move towards social justice. This boundary is where the topic of our paper lays: the reality of statistics of poverty, and the will of all citizens, especially those who care for children in families, communities and schools, to address the injustice of child poverty. For teacher educators and beginning teachers, we have an obligation to push against dominant notions of what it means to be poor, and to indeed

interrogate our unconscious biases and assumptions about children and parents who live in poverty.

Storied Assumptions of Parents Living in Contexts of Poverty

Both Pushor and Ciuffetelli Parker take up with pre-service students how important, and sometimes how difficult it is as well, for people in the general public, and especially teachers who interact daily with children and their families, to avoid viewing students and parents who live in contexts of poverty as lacking (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012a, 2013; Pushor & Murphy, 2004, 2010). Ciuffetelli Parker (2012b) explained the particularity of this work:

"As education professors, we teach against storied assumptions of children and communities affected by poverty and use narrative methods to help reframe beginning teachers' perspectives. By teaching against the grain (of formal standardized curriculum, middle class notions of schooling, and prescriptive methodologies), we often work in tension with teacher candidates to actively and intentionally resist deficit-based stereotyping and to challenge ourselves and our teacher candidates to learn more about children and families affected by poverty". (p. 2)

Deconstructing this deficit model (Valencia, 1997) of thinking, pre-service teachers come to see that very few of us are immune to deficit ways of looking at our world because of the very nature of our lived past experiences and the stereotypes that exist in our society. As Ciuffetelli Parker (2012a) noted, educators often default to stereotypical life experiences which help filter and explain the conditions of our society and how it affects teaching. "This kind of filter, however, does not help children who live in poverty or the accessibility to the equal education that they deserve, no matter their living conditions." (p. 3).

Indeed, it may seem easy for educators to assign blame to parents when their children are not performing in school, or it may be very tempting to lower learning expectations for students or "fix

them" using a deficit model (Milner, 2013). None is ideal because, in the long run, teachers run the risk of consolidating within their practices deficit viewpoints of parents and children living in poverty and their ability to be successful. Our paper herein considers work towards the deeper rooted issues of poverty and schooling, by using narrative accounts of lived experiences alongside teachers, parents and students. "Ultimately, it is important to look at our children, students, and families, and see what is there rather than what is not there" (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, as cited in Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012a, p. 3).

As teacher educators working with pre-service students, we continue to pose the difficult question in our courses: What can educators do about the stark reality of unequal situations in which children grow up? For pre-service teachers beginning their teaching career in our 21st century global and economic reality, this question presents them with a difficult challenge. As Milner (2013) stated:

"[E]ducators may embrace the idea that their own, their parents', and their students' success and status have been earned. They may believe that failure emanates solely as a result of making bad decisions... However, unearned opportunities and consequences are sometimes passed down from one generation to the next. Yet many educators believe that their own success is merited because they have worked hard...and made the right choices and decisions. They have little or no conception of how class and socioeconomic privilege and opportunity manifest". (p. 35)

We find, too, that many pre-service teachers have ingrained notions of success based on their own lived experiences of hard work and status as something that is earned and that anyone can attain. While this is furthest from the truth, those who have social economic privilege make this mistake often. It is important in our teacher education coursework, as a result, that we ask pre-service teachers to interrogate notions of meritocracy, and the widely held belief that success is based on ability and talent rather than on class privilege or wealth.

Overview of the Research Study

The field text for this paper is drawn from a research study which addresses the question: *How does living out a "curriculum of parents" in a teacher education program shift or change teachers' beliefs and assumptions about parents and enhance their practices of engaging parents in children's teaching and learning?* Begun in 2009 and ongoing, Pushor has engaged in taped conversations with four of her former pre-service teachers who are now at differing stages in their teaching careers. In these individual conversations, teachers share stories of their current practices as educators to engage parents in their children's learning and of how projects or assignments they did as they lived out a "curriculum of parents" in their former course work may have influenced their current practice. In analyzing the field texts which are gathered, Pushor is developing deeper understandings of what is important in a "curriculum of parents" and what significance living out such a curriculum may have for changing teachers' practices in regard to how and why they engage parents in their children's learning. Cat, whom we introduce below, is one of the four participants in this study. We share stories of her experiences within a curriculum of parents and then as a third year teacher. Her narratives illustrate what was *revealed* to her through her engagement with parents in a project for her community education course, what *revelations* she awakened to in terms of her storied beliefs and assumptions about parents and poverty, and the *reformation* she worked to make in her practices as a teacher in Ecuador.

Method

In this paper, we combine Pushor's work with a curriculum of parents with Ciuffetelli Parker's work with poverty and schooling, by exploring one pre-service teacher's experience in a curriculum of parents using Ciuffetelli Parker's theoretical notions of narrative reveal, narrative revelation and reformation (the narrative 3Rs) (2012a; 2012b). We use narrative inquiry methodology and the 3Rs to excavate how storied assumptions of parents living in poverty can be challenged in teacher education coursework in order to make visible how preconceived societal mindsets can be reformed.

Narrative inquiry

The methodological approach for this study is narrative inquiry. The focus of narrative inquiry is "lived experience – that is, lives and how they are lived" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry considers participants to be holders of and constructors of knowledge. As they tell stories of their experiences, the participants share both what they know and how the particularity of the context has shaped their knowing. Narrative inquiry, therefore, is a research methodology in which theoretical conceptualizations arise out of and are informed by experience rather than one which is intended to have the research prove/disprove a predetermined conceptual or theoretical framework. The intention of this inquiry, then, is to have participants give accounts of their experiences with parents in their own terms (Clandinin, 1986). Such terms will reveal their personal perspectives and insights, and what constraints they experience or opportunities they see to act on their knowledge, giving us a "fine-grained" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) insight not available through other methodologies.

Given the space available to us in this article, we have chosen to focus on the lived experiences of one of the four former pre-service teachers in the research study. We selected Cat because she has been out of the university for the longest period of time, she is the only participant who has taught in two different locations, and she has worked in a school context in which her beliefs and practices were not in alignment with the dominant beliefs and practices being lived out on the school landscape. In narrative inquiry, as in many other qualitative research methods, this research is not intended to be generalized but instead is intended to have "*an explanatory, invitational quality, [to have] authenticity, and [to have] adequacy and plausibility*" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 185, italics in original). In sharing Cat's stories of experience, we are asking, "How are her experiences educative for herself and for others?" In our fine-grained inquiry into the particularities of Cat's experience, we foreground details, discoveries, shifts and changes in her thoughts and actions which provide us, and the field more broadly, with deeper insights and more informed understandings of how beginning teachers may develop strength-based relationships with parents who live in contexts of poverty.

The 3Rs: Narrative reveal, narrative revelation, and narrative reformation.

This paper explores how we use narrative approaches to reveal beliefs and values about parents who live in poverty through the starting point of a narrative inquiry framework of *living, telling, retelling and reliving* (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) as seen through the narrative reveal, revelation, and reformation of one pre-service teacher. Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) narrative inquiry terms *living, telling, retelling and reliving* have inspired both authors who apply the terms in order to burrow deeper into their own research inquiries. Ciuffetelli Parker, inspired by Connelly and Clandinin's work, formulated and furthered her own terms (the 3Rs) from the starting point of *living, telling, retelling, reliving*, in order to interrogate further her specific research program and topic of poverty and education. Ciuffetelli Parker (2013) wrote,

"Connelly and Clandinin's narrative inquiry terms living, telling, retelling, and reliving are useful terms to help describe the process of how teachers can burrow deeply into narratives of experience, as stories are told and retold, in order to make new meaning of their knowledge-in-practice and ultimately to use narratives as a way to help reveal hidden biases, as well as to help make newly formed narrative revelations worthy of further interrogation for future practice [e.g. narrative reformation of mindset and practice]...[N]arrative revelation is excavated through lived and storied experience – the living and the telling. In this living and telling, and with every new retelling, the complexities of poverty and schooling are understood at a deeper level".

In this paper, we use the framework of: *narrative reveal* to help show how unconscious assumptions can bubble to the surface through repeated telling; *narrative revelation* to show how educators, once a new revelation has been uncovered, can further interrogate and challenge the status quo of societal stereotyping of people living in poverty, and; *narrative reformation* to

show how educators can reform their practices through an awakened and storied account of living alongside parents who live in contexts of poverty.

Cat's Story: Joining Parents in a Book Club

Introducing Cat

Cat was a student in Pushor's course, *Teaching and Learning in Community Education*, an elective course offered to pre-service teachers in the final term of their teacher education program. As detailed earlier, an intention within the course is to engage pre-service teachers in experiences and readings which enable them to reconceptualise schooling in the context of family and community and which provide them with opportunities to engage with parents outside of the formal structures of the classroom and the school. One of the assignments in the course is to design and implement a 20 hour community engagement project in one of the community schools with which Pushor is partnered.

In response to this assignment, Cat chose to work with a pre-service teacher colleague to facilitate a women's empowerment book club with mothers at the school in which she was situated. Having learned about a women's empowerment book club which was happening at another school, Cat and her partner chose to create one and to offer it to parents at their community school. The intention of the book club paralleled that of any book club: to get a group together, select a book to read, and then meet regularly to talk about the selection. The women's empowerment book club provided an opportunity for mothers to come together at the school, after taking their children to their classrooms, and to take some time for their own personal pleasure and development in the company of others. The women had coffee and snacks, and talked about the book they were reading and their lives. As the book club unfolded over the course of the three month term, Cat developed a close friendship with one particular mother, Rebecca. Occasionally the two of them would meet to have coffee or lunch, spending time together beyond their shared time in the book club.

Cat's Narrative Reveal

Spending time with the mothers in the book club, Cat was introduced to a new way of being in

relationship with parents, as a teacher, than she had previously imagined.

"It wasn't something I would have thought teachers could do. Thinking about your role as a teacher and thinking about how, basically, you should be interacting with students and with parents. Interacting with parents is usually seen as in conferences or in a setting where the teacher is behind the desk and parents are on the other side of the desk. It was really interesting to step back from that role as a teacher candidate at that time. It was a really nice way to start my career.

... What was so interesting about [the book club] was being able to get a chance to talk with women – not about their kids ... what their kids were doing in class, or ... their grades, or things like that. That wasn't my job there in the book club – my role. ... We had this book we were supposed to read – but – sometimes that didn't happen and we ended up talking about other sorts of things. ...Out of that book club I ended up developing a relationship with a woman there – Rebecca [a pseudonym] – a parent there". (Recorded conversation, April 20, 2010)

Cat's experience in the book club gave her a completely new sense of what it means to be in relationship with parents. As she told of her experiences with the women in the book club, one of Cat's first comments was, "It wasn't something I would have thought teachers could do." At that point in her teacher education program, Cat indicated that she had taken up a typical understanding of how teachers come together with parents. She assumed her relationships with parents would occur only in formalized settings such as parent teacher conferences or meetings across a desk. What Cat's narrative reveals is that those assumptions are challenged by her experiences in the book club – and discarded – as she formed a personal and side by side relationship with the women, as a fellow woman rather than as a teacher cast in a

professional role. Cat found the opportunity to gather together with the women to talk about a book, and whatever else arose, an interesting aspect of the experience. "...What was so interesting about [the book club] was being able to get a chance to talk with women – not about their kids ...what their kids were doing in class, or ... their grades, or things like that." Cat left the book club experience with a very different sense of who she could be as a person and a teacher alongside parents than with how she began. Cat saw the value of forming friendships with parents, for personal as well as professional reasons.

Cat's Narrative Revelation

In her narrative, Cat talks about her experience with the women's empowerment book club in terms of her revelations as a new teacher.

"So many of those women had completely different lives than I had. And yet we could connect. A lot of the time there's such a disconnect between parents and teachers. And you're seen just as that. You're seen only as parent, only as teacher. With the book club, and meeting the women in that way, you're able to develop friendships. They shared things with me that really helped me learn about the community and about experiences they are living and their children are living that otherwise I would have had such a superficial understanding of.

[From the book club,] you could start the year with so much extra knowledge and understanding. You're able to make connections. Then people are more apt to open up to each other. Like even the women in the club, some of the women knew each other but some not. And they could develop friendships and connections through that. That would just open up the opportunity for such a rich environment. And the stories that I learned from those women, they have valuable knowledge to share with me, with other teachers, and in terms of what happens in the classroom.

... Rebecca had really been involved in a lot of gang-related activity and drugs and all this sort of thing. She had actually spent time in the penitentiary. I remember leaving that lunch and thinking, 'Wow, this woman had this life that seems so extreme and so hard and with so many challenges and yet here we are together talking about Where the Heart is' (Letts, 1995). It really makes you take a step back and think about things that are important. Honestly, I would have never thought I could connect in the way that I did with someone who had a life so different than mine. It was humbling. I realized how we can come together and connect over our commonalities.

Going into that book club I didn't know anything about the women. ...It was only what [Rebecca] shared with me that I was able to come to know and just look at it and connect on commonalities. I wonder if knowing that information initially, if people would tend to disconnect and say, "Oh, that person is unlike me." From the book club, I learned I can connect with people that I don't know - based on something that can be set up. I can create situations or circumstances that can enable relationships to be formed and I guess just really break down barriers that might happen with assumptions and beliefs that we've grown up with, that we've been engrained with. It's a good thing to know I can connect". (Recorded conversation, April 20, 2010)

As Cat discussed her experiences with the women in the book club, and in particular with Rebecca, she made visible a number of revelations. First, she was honest about the fact that she entered the situation of the book club with some engrained assumptions and beliefs formed throughout her growing up, the kind of engrained assumptions and beliefs we all form as a result of our middle class life experiences. She shared how she understood Rebecca's life as

extreme and as hard; a life marked by drug and gang activity and a resulting jail sentence. With her own life experience being very different from that, having grown up in a middle class home, Cat recognized the assumptions she unconsciously held about individuals with life experiences such as Rebecca's. While she did not name her assumptions, Cat expressed, "It was humbling. I realized how we can come together and connect over our commonalities." The assumptions and judgments Cat unconsciously carried with her became visible to her, and were uprooted, when she became friends with Rebecca and found that Rebecca was more like Cat than unlike her.

It was a significant revelation for Cat, one brought about by her deconstruction of the notion of "other," to find that she could connect and form relationships with parents who lived in different contexts than she did or had different life experiences than she had. No longer defining Rebecca relative to herself (Madrid, as cited in Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008, p. 2) and her life experiences, Cat saw Rebecca as the rich individual she is, in her own right.

Second, another revelation occurred for Cat as she learned that the women in the book club held a lot of knowledge. She expressed, "They shared things with me that really helped me learn about the community and about experiences they are living and their children are living that otherwise I would have had such a superficial understanding of." Cat recognized the women as strength-based, as holders of knowledge that was rich and valuable, knowledge that could be educative for Cat, as a teacher who would work closely with their children and families. She recognized how much she could learn from parents when she spent the time to come together with them and to truly get to know them.

Third, a synthesizing revelation that Cat identified as she retold her lived experiences with the book club was that, as a teacher, she realized she can create circumstances that enable relationships to form between her and the parents with whom she works. "From the book club, I learned I can connect with people that I don't know - based on something that can be set up. I can create situations or circumstances that can enable relationships to be formed." It is a striking revelation for Cat, in terms of her future practice as a teacher, because she recognized that she can purposefully and deliberately design

opportunities in which it is possible for her to form deep relationships with parents. No longer feeling tied to, or constrained by, the “ritualized encounters” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) that typically define parent teacher relations, Cat understood that her relationships with parents can be deeply connected, reciprocal in their knowledge exchange, and mutually educative and supportive.

Cat’s Narrative Reformation

After completing her teacher education degree, Cat decided to move to Mexico to gain international teaching experience. After teaching in Mexico for one year, Cat moved to Ecuador to engage in a different international teaching experience. In the spring of her second year in Ecuador, so as a third year teacher, Cat talked with Pushor about her current teaching experiences, reflecting on them in relation to her experiences with parents in her undergraduate teacher education.

“[The women’s empowerment book club] was an ideal situation. My current situation is very different. I’m trying to make some changes in my practice now with how I interact with parents. ...There is a sign right outside my school that says, in Spanish, ‘Parents are not permitted beyond this point. Students only.’ If they need to see me, they have to make an appointment, but only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

I wanted to send like a welcome letter to the parents ... and my admin says, ‘Don’t put anything in writing.’ I sent something anyway. ...I sent a parent input form - a getting to know the kids in my class. ...They’re telling me strengths of their child, an area where they can improve, how they see their kids academically, socially. And you would be surprised at the things they told me. Some parents told me one word answers. Others attached another whole sheet.

Parents have always been told, ‘No you can’t come in, stay out, make an appointment, talk to the secretary.’

Just opening this up was big. The things the parents told me – we’re going through a divorce, the child’s grandma died, or just a huge wealth of knowledge they shared. They’ve never had a voice in anything, you could see. They’re surprised, ‘I have a say?’ They’re surprised someone has asked them to share what they know about their child”. (Recorded conversation, April 20, 2010)

Given her narrative revelations about relationships with parents, which resulted from the living and telling of her book club experiences, Cat entered her teaching position in Ecuador with a sense of agent (Monteagudo, 2011). Cat learned from her earlier experience that she can “create situations or circumstances” to engage with parents and to build relationships with them. Convinced that it was an important and worthwhile part of her teacher role to “do something” (Amendt, 2008), Cat pursued opportunities to form relationships with parents, even when her administration specifically directed her not to. “On one hand, self is a product of the conditions and contexts in which it operates. On the other hand, self is constructed and transformed through the stories it receives, creates and shares” (Monteagudo, 2011, p. 299). Within Cat’s story of resisting the directive of her administration, she makes visible a narrative reformation in her thinking and practice. Regardless of the status quo at her school, where parents were kept outside locked gates and teachers met with parents at select times and on their terms, Cat chose to believe in parents as holders of knowledge (Pushor, 2009, 2011) and as individuals who have much to contribute to the schooling of their children. She pushed against the narrative grain (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012b, 2013) of her school landscape as she invited parents to share information with her that would be important to her in her work with their children. Even in a context that was challenging and far from the “ideal situation” which she had experienced with the women’s empowerment book club, Cat continued to transform her strength-based beliefs about parents into lived action within her teaching practice.

Closing Thoughts

As we discussed earlier, there is a lack of coursework in many undergraduate teacher education programs, in Canada and the United States, which attends to the place and voice of parents in their children's schooling. The result of this omission is that many new teachers enter the teaching profession with taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about parents which remain unconscious and unchallenged. The significance of these unchallenged beliefs and assumptions becomes even greater as the frequently white middle class norms of teachers are imposed on families without this same social and economic positioning. As the literature on poverty demonstrates, many individuals in society, including teachers, hold a deficit view of parents and children living in contexts of poverty. Given their lived experiences, these individuals often believe in meritocracy, having an uninformed sense of how class and opportunity manifest themselves in society.

As we learned from Cat's narratives of experience, a purposeful and explicit curriculum of parents in teacher education curriculum provided her with the opportunity to interrupt habitual, unquestioned, and deficit based notions of parents and children. Arising out of all that was revealed to Cat as she engaged personally with parents living in contexts different from her own, she experienced a number of revelations that powerfully shaped her understanding of parents and contexts of poverty. Acting on this newly gained teacher knowledge, Cat reformed both her beliefs and her practices as she moved out of her teacher education program and into her first years of teaching. Even in the face of tension and competing narratives of teachers, parents, and teaching, Cat continued to live out a narrative reformation of parents and their place in schools and schooling.

Just as Cat learned that she can set things up to connect with people she does not know and "just

really break down barriers that might happen with assumptions and beliefs that we've grown up with, that we've been engrained with," as teacher educators we have learned that we can do the same. We see that we can consciously set things up in our pre-service teacher education classrooms to create and facilitate a conscious and purposeful curriculum of parents that provides beginning teachers with a framework to excavate storied assumptions they may hold in their lived experiences regarding parents and poverty. The elements of *narrative reveal*, *narrative revelation*, and *narrative reformation* are useful because they provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to explore deeply their stories lived and relived and their stories told and retold. Narrative has the potential to create a profound impact on the understanding of both one's own and others' life experiences. As Bruner (2004) suggested in regard to living an examined life, "If we learn how people put their narratives together considering as well how they *might* have proceeded, we might then have contributed something new to that great ideal" (p. 709). The elements of narrative reveal, narrative revelation, and narrative reformation cause us to consider how teachers grow into their teaching roles; how there appears to be a developmental nature to learning to work alongside parents and children living in contexts of poverty. A curriculum of parents affords pre-service teachers possibilities to consciously develop beliefs and practices in regard to working with families in honoring ways. The powerful elements of narrative reveal, narrative revelation, and narrative transformation have the potential to open teacher candidates in undergraduate education programs to considerations of what it means to live a teaching life, one that is lived in relationship with parents and children

References

- Amendt, T. (2008). *Involvement to engagement: Community education practices in a suburban elementary school and an inner-city community school*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.
- Bruner, J. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Bruner, J. (2004). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 71(3), 691-710. Campaign 2000 Report Card (2012). 2012 Report card on child and family poverty. *Campaign 2000. End child and family poverty in Canada*. Toronto: Family Service Toronto.
- Ciuffetelli Parker, D. (2012a). *Poverty and Education: A Niagara Perspective*. Policy Brief, Niagara Community Observatory.
- Ciuffetelli Parker, D. (2012b). *Tight times: Teaching against storied assumptions of children and communities affected by poverty*. Paper presented at Narrative Matters, Paris, France, May, 2012.
- Ciuffetelli Parker, D. (2013). Narrative understandings of poverty and schooling: Reveal, revelation, reformation of mindsets *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education (IJCDSE)*, Special Issue Volume 3, Issue 2, ISSN 2042 6364. <http://www.infonomics-society.org/IJCDSE/>
- Ciuffetelli Parker, D. & Flessa, J. (2011). *Poverty and schools in Ontario: How seven elementary schools are working to improve education*. Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario. Toronto, ON.
- Clandinin, D.J. (1986). *Classroom practice: Teacher images in action*. Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.
- Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. C. Camilli, & P.B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477-488). Washington: AERA.
- Constantino, S.M. (2006, December). *Metlife survey of the American teacher: What we need to know about parent involvement*. Retrieved on December 8, 2006, from <http://www.familyfriendlyschools.com/blog/index.htm>
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- Hulchanski, D. (2011). Disappearing middle class. Retrieved November 15, 2011 from www.thestar.com/news/insight/article/728289
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Letts, B. (1995), *Where the heart is*. New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc.
- Madrid, A. (2001). *Missing people and others: Joining together to expand the circle*. In M. Anderson & P. Hill-Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Milner, H.R. (2013). *Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens. Review of research education. AERA, Washington, D.C., Vol. 37, pp.1-53.*
- Monteagudo, J.G. (2011). Jerome Bruner and the challenges of the narrative turn: Then and now. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21(2), 295-302.
- Noguera, P. (2011, June 1). Urban schools must start empowering – and stop blaming – parents. Retrieved from *In Motion Magazine* website: http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/er11/pn_compt.htm
- Patte, M. (2011). Examining preservice teacher knowledge and competencies in establishing family-school partnerships. *The School Community Journal*, 21(2), 143-160.
- Pushor, D. (2009). The situation of parents in the curricular commonplaces: A place of equal rank? *LEARNING Landscapes*, 2(2), 139-154.
- Pushor, D. (2011). Attending to milieu: Living a *curriculum of parents* alongside teacher candidates. In J. Kitchen, D. Ciuffetelli Parker & D. Pushor (Eds.), *Narrative inquiries into curriculum making in teacher education*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 217-238.
- Pushor, D. (2013). Bringing into being a curriculum of parents. In D. Pushor and the Parent Engagement Collaborative, *Portals of promise: Stories of transforming beliefs and practices through a curriculum of parents*. Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

- Pushor, D. & Murphy, B. (2004). Parent marginalization, marginalized parents: Creating a place for parents on the school landscape. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 50, (3), 221-235.
- Pushor, D. & Murphy, B. (2010, December 2). Schools as protectorates: Stories of two Mi'kmaq mothers. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 114.
- Schwab, J.J. (1973). The practical 3: Translation into curriculum. *The School Review*, 81(4), 501-522.
- Turner-Vorbeck, T. & Miller Marsh, M.(2008). Introduction. In T. Turner-Vorbeck & M. Miller Marsh (Eds.), *Other kinds of families: Embracing diversity in schools* (pp. 1-3). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Valencia, R. R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London. Falmer Press.