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Main Article:

From Research Assistant to Researcher: Being Wakeful in a Mentorship Journey About Methodology, Poverty, and Deficit Thinking

Heather Grenville
Ontario Certified Teacher, CANADA
h.grenville@hotmail.com

Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker
Faculty of Education
Brock University, 1842 King Street East
Hamilton, ON L8K 1V7, CANADA
darlene.ciuffetelli-parker@brocku.ca

Abstract

This article explores how insights and new knowledge were incorporated about narrative inquiry methodology, poverty, and deficit ways of thinking through a journey of mentorship. The experiences of a graduate student, as she journeys through the roles of a research assistant and graduate researcher, all the while being part of a positive mentorship experience, are relayed. The article describes the journey of an evolving researcher who becomes wakeful through the narrative inquiry methodology while engaged as a research assistant as well as a graduate student alongside her supervisor.

Index Terms: qualitative research; narrative inquiry; education and training; research mentoring; poverty; deficit thinking

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1. Introduction

Heather was raised in a rural farming community in southwestern Ontario, Canada. It was a small community with one elementary school and several churches; it is a place where

her family has lived for generations. After high school, Heather attended a mid-sized university in southern Ontario. After university, Heather felt lost and without direction as her undergraduate degree did not prepare her for a specific occupation. She decided to make a change, and moved to Australia for two years. While there, Heather completed her teaching degree and worked at a secondary school for a year before returning to Canada. In 2007, back in Ontario, Heather was looking for work as a teacher. She was naïve about how difficult it would be to find work as a teacher. During this time, Heather was enrolled in the Master of Education program at Brock University, and she applied and was hired as the research assistant (RA) to Associate Professor, Dr Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker, to assist her with a longitudinal study on poverty and education. Heather continued to work for Darlene for 3 years, as they completed the initial poverty study and a second subsequent research project. During this time, their research team visited more than 15 elementary schools in rural and urban areas across the province. The schools had been identified as schools challenged by poverty. While visiting the schools, the research team "developed narratives that described ways adult members (teachers, parents, administrators, and community groups/partners) in the sample schools thought about and shaped their work with students living in challenging socio-economic circumstances" (Ciuffetelli Parker & Becker, 2009). These schools ranged from small (less than 150 students) to large (more than 600), servicing several ages of students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. It was the first time since Heather was a student herself that she had been in an elementary school. During the very first weeks of working for Darlene, Heather began to draw parallels between her own elementary school experiences, her teaching experiences, and her experiences during site visits as a research assistant. These parallels eventually formed the basis of her M.Ed. thesis (Grenville, 2012).

This article will take the reader on a journey from research assistant to researcher as Heather worked alongside Darlene in both roles. The journey is important to illuminate because it uncovers storied experiences that could help developing researchers and educators understand deeper issues related to methodology and, in the case of this article, the topics of poverty, education, and deficit theory. The article is presented in six sections. Section 1 presents a narrative account of how Heather came to the realisation, through story, that she grew up in a community affected by poverty. The section also includes a discussion of the original stirrings Heather experienced, which eventually led her to a state of *wakefulness*. Section 2 provides the theoretical and methodological background for the study. Section 3 describes the process Heather underwent transitioning from a research assistant to a researcher. Section 4 uses stories from a variety of texts to illustrate narratively Heather's journey as a transitioning researcher while being mentored in the areas of *narrative inquiry* and poverty research. In Section 5, Darlene provides a discussion about Heather's growth as a researcher from her perspective as mentor, researcher, and supervisor. Finally, Section 6 concludes the article with an articulation of what students, supervisors, and the field of research can draw from the storied experience about the research journey in this article.

1.1. Heather's Narrative: The Beginning of the Stirrings

One of my first responsibilities as Darlene's RA was to attend focus group sessions at various high poverty elementary schools in Ontario, both in rural and urban areas. After the very first visit, I knew it was going to be more than just a research assistant job. On the 2-hour drive home after one particular day, the stories from the parents and teachers who took part in our focus groups kept rolling around in my mind. I could not get their stories out of my head. Many of the voices of the parents in the focus groups struck a chord with me. Specifically, the parents had discussed some of the challenges they and their families faced in their community. The parents brought up issues such as unemployment and housing challenges, and not being able to afford family vacations. Some talked about how many of the teachers did not live in the area, and were challenged to understand the intricacies of the community. Why did their voices seem so familiar to me? Why could I relate so well with the families we met? By the time I reached my home, I was quite upset. During that long drive, deep inside, something had stirred. It was the beginning of an acknowledgement that I had long ago buried.

The memories were bubbling up but I did not know what to do with them. The smells of school lunches, recess, and Play-Doh® started me reminiscing about my own elementary school experiences. Suddenly it struck me. The community where I was raised faced the same issues, had the same concerns, and was dealing with the same problems as the families in the school I just visited. Before this moment, it had never occurred to me that I grew up in a community challenged by poverty and, in fact, poverty was something with which I had intimate experience.

As more memories of my childhood came flooding back, I began to recall my elementary school experiences in a very similar way in which the focus group participants were relaying their experiences to me in my role as a research assistant. I remembered small things, like not being able to purchase brand name clothes or toys. But I also remembered other phenomena that had been brought up during the research site visits, such as very few of my classmates going on family vacations. Our family vacations were not lavish by any means. Our trips usually involved camping in a tent and driving several hours to our destination. These vacations were rare and far between. It was difficult for my parents, as farmers, to leave the farm. It was our livelihood. It was our life. The animals and crops needed constant tending and it was nearly impossible to find someone who could take over the day-to-day responsibilities for any length of time, as all our neighbours had their own farms to attend. To leave the farm, even for a couple days was a very big deal. There was always a deep-seeded sense of responsibility and priority in our home where work came first and fun came second. Vacations were the most stressful for my father, who worried constantly while we were

> away about what was happening at home. For him, relief only came as we pulled back into our driveway. Such was life for most families in our rural town and I imagine now it was because there was so much riding on each and every head of livestock, as well as each crop growing in the fields.
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> Another story the parents told in the focus group sessions was about how teachers at the schools kept both a physical and emotional distance from families surrounding the school community. Akin to my upbringing, most of the elementary teachers did not live in the school community. On particularly snowy days, I remember many teachers being late or not coming at all because of the dangerous driving conditions from far away. However, it was rare for students to miss school. Each and every day, the classroom was full. There was nowhere else for us to go, nothing else for us except to come to school or stay home and help on the farm. I wonder now how much my teachers understood of our home life as students and families struggling to survive.
>
> As I transitioned from elementary school to secondary school, many of my classmates made the decision to join the workforce or stay on the farm, rather than continue with their education. I was lucky that there were clear expectations from my parents that I would complete both secondary and post-secondary education. Many of my peers were pressured by their families to leave school before they graduated high school to tend to the farm in order to keep the family income alive. None of these lived experiences seemed strange until now, looking back on it as an adult with new eyes, suddenly having realised that I did indeed grow up in a community where poverty was the day-to-day reality, where many were at the cusp of living in dire poverty or, if you were lucky, just getting by.

1.2. Becoming Wakeful as a Research Assistant: Heather's Role as a Beginning Researcher

While working as an RA, Heather composed field notes documenting the physical and educational context of each school site, as well as her own feelings and the emotional impact each site visit had on her. After visiting several schools with the research team, the research procedure became second nature to her. However, it was the narratives of participants (rather than the developing school case study) that led her to the stirrings that continued to tug. Heather was learning that this "kind of inquiry necessitates ongoing reflection" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 184). Clandinin and Connelly called this *wakefulness*. Elbaz-Luwisch's (2010) review of Clandinin and Connelly's seminal book on narrative inquiry focused on their term "*wakefulnes*s as a new way to speak about reflexivity and being critical" (p. 274). She continued:

> The *wakeful* narrative inquirer would be aware of her own positioning in the field, and her privilege in society (not least as an educated person with a university affiliation); she would have studied critical perspectives and be

> able to take them into account while protecting the authenticity of participants' accounts and her own intellectual independence. (p. 274)

Heather became immersed in the participants' stories; they were affecting her more than she realised. Heather was continually aware of her own stirrings and the connection she felt to the participants' stories. As they continued through the research process, Heather engaged herself further in the details of the research, listening and learning from what the participants were saying. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provided a guide, by instructing that "we need to be *wakeful* about what we are doing as narrative inquirers, so we can continue to learn what it means to do narrative inquiry" (p. 184). Heather was mindful to becoming wakeful and learning about the narrative inquiry process.

By the time they reached the end of the data collection phase of the project, Darlene had mentored Heather in the aspects of documenting narrative notes that paid close attention to place (context), sociality (feelings), and temporality (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Heather's field notes started to reflect her newly discovered wakefulness, as well as factual documentation of the procedures that Heather had practiced as an undergraduate science student. Heather began to take detailed, expressive notes emphasising situations, events, and conversations that seemed inconsequential at the beginning of the study, but became very important as the research unfolded. Heather shared these notes with Darlene, telling and retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) the stories over and over again. In this living and telling, Heather experienced a *narrative reveal* (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013). This reveal helped her to understand at a deeper level the complexities of poverty in relation to her childhood (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013). As Heather listened to the stories of teachers, administrators, and parents during the poverty research program in which she was involved, Heather was *wakened* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to possibilities that Heather was yet unaware would teach her about the importance of narrative inquiry, poverty, and her own place on the landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). Three years later in 2010, as the poverty program came into its final year, these stirrings, the field notes, and the reflections from the poverty project formed the basis and idea for Heather's own master's thesis research.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Background for the Study

In order for Heather to make sense of her new revelation, and the fact that she wanted to continue in this research topic for her own master's thesis work, Heather needed to find out more about poverty in education while still in the midst of being a research assistant in the poverty project itself. Heather also needed to delve further into the methodology of narrative inquiry. Heather completed the required courses for her master's degree and asked Darlene to be her research supervisor for her thesis research venture. With Darlene's help and guidance, Heather formulated ideas and concepts, and lived alongside Darlene to acquire deeper understanding of the phenomena of poverty, education, and narrative inquiry. The following two subsections provide some context of what Heather learned about poverty and narrative inquiry from the work of Darlene and other scholars.

2.1. Poverty and Education

The poverty and education research program with Darlene was the first Canadian research project of its kind, as it focused on poverty and schooling with a close to the ground inquiry in several elementary schools across Ontario. It was brought to fruition by the need for Canadian research into poverty that took into account the context of the Ontario and Canadian school landscape. Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011) described this need for research based on the Canadian education context:

> Much of the current research on the impact of poverty on education is based in the United States. For many reasons, American-based research is useful to those in other jurisdictions. And for many other reasons, it is important that we do not assume that the impacts are the same. Ontario is different in many ways. We have a different health care system. Our social services are different. We recognized that it was important to add an Ontario perspective to the research on education and poverty. (p. 12)

As a teacher, Heather was learning that many educators, including herself, carry stereotypes about people living in poverty. As Heather began to recognise the stereotypes and biases she carried with her, Heather also identified the "need to modify her approaches to teaching and, in turn, reframe her mindset of her students and their life experiences" (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013, p. 1121). Heather started this process by reframing her mindset about her own childhood, and later brought this same approach to the students she teaches. Flessa (2006) summarised it well when he stated, "It is not a surprise to learn that all traditional measures of school success systematically rank students from poor families lower than their wealthier peers" (p. 2). Heather learned that nearly one out of seven children in Canada lives in poverty; in Ontario, 393,000 children live in poverty and 35.8% of children living in poverty live in families with at least one parent working part time or full time (Campaign, 2000, 2012). Ontario is Canada's largest province and has some of the most dire poverty issues in Canada, which came as surprise to Heather during the initial stages of the poverty program. Ciuffetelli Parker (2013) articulated the importance of making authentic connections with students' backgrounds and contexts, which helped Heather to begin to grasp and realise her own biased assumptions. As time passes, children who grow up in poverty continue to face economic challenges. Heather knew this fact to be true based upon her own lived experiences in rural Ontario. She was reminded of her many peers who continued in farm work, some not even graduating high school, and who now struggle to raise their own children and make a living, as their parents did.

Additional barriers for students may come from the preconceptions of educators. This is something Heather would come to learn about herself in her future role as a classroom teacher (as discussed below). Heather would learn that,

> Oftentimes, educators default to past stereotypical life experiences and, in doing so, hidden biases can act as a filter to help 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. (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012, p. 4)

Gorski (2012) raised a similar concern:

> When stereotypes creep into educational practice, policy, and programs, educators and policymakers risk justifying injustice, explaining away failure (including our failure to insist upon equitable educational access), and adopting misguided reform efforts, such as those aimed at redressing inequalities by "fixing" poor people rather than the conditions that disenfranchise them. (p. 314)

As part of Darlene's research team, Heather learned that there are many successful teachers working in schools challenged by poverty. At times, the statistical information on poverty became overwhelming, leaving Heather with a sense of hopelessness. However, working alongside Darlene, Heather learned as Ciuffetelli Parker and Craig (2013) stated, "grand statistical declarations convey the sense that poverty is all encompassing and that there are not forces and people actively working against it" (p. 36). "Rather than dwelling on children's perceived deficits, we believe teachers should be encouraged to focus instead on children's competence as cultural and intellectual people" (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 366). Successful teachers avoid *deficit thinking*; they look at children and see what is there, rather than what is missing (Flessa, 2006; Valencia, 1997). As a researcher, and especially in her role as a classroom teacher, Heather would learn this for herself. This will be further detailed in a subsequent section.

2.2. Narrative Inquiry

The stories of parents at the high-poverty research sites that aroused wakefulness in Heather's beginning journey as a research assistant also became the inspiration for her to pay closer attention to the methodology of narrative inquiry. The stories evoked strong emotions for her, and Heather decided that narrative inquiry was the appropriate methodology to use in her own thesis research, in hopes that her narrative inquiry study could be the starting point for beginning school-based scholars like herself to incorporate this method in their own practices, and to pay attention to experience as a source of knowledge in school-based research. Heather learned from her guide and research mentor/supervisor that, "Narrative inquiry, as a methodology for understanding experience as lived and as told through stories, is an essential way to address problems of knowledge" (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013, p. 1118).

Narrative can be defined as "a story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious" (entry at Dictionary.com). This definition has been further developed into a method of research, which draws out stories of experience and helps us learn from them. For the purposes of this article, the definition of narrative inquiry described by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) is applied:

> Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 477)

Heather was learning to find value in her own stories as she came to this new way of thinking about experience. "Story is not so much a structured answer to a question, or a way of accounting for actions and events, as it is a gateway, a portal, for narrative inquiry into meaning and significance" (Xu & Connelly, 2010, p. 356). Heather was learning her stories and the stories of others were of high significance.

Heather's revelations regarding her childhood in poverty continued to evolve. The phenomenon under study for her alongside Darlene was poverty as it related to education. In order to study poverty, narrative inquiry became a way to come to know certain conditions of the phenomenon. In this manner, narrative also became a phenomenon under study, which caused the stirrings, and which ultimately provided an understanding of the knowledge of poverty and education. Heather began reading *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The terms *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place* struck a chord with her as she realised the terms described the journey she was on, and she knew she wanted to use these terms to focus her thesis research. Heather was drawn to the temporal aspect as she moved between her childhood memories and tried to reconcile them with her current teaching position. Heather was grounded by the rural community (the place) where she grew up and now as a teacher she continues to work in a rural secondary school also affected by poverty. Finally, Heather recognised the importance of social relationships that first became apparent to her as she listened to stories from parents and teachers in her role as a research assistant. These were the stories that began the stirrings inside her, which evoked so much emotion and prompted her to pursue her thesis research on the topic of poverty and education using the narrative inquiry method.

3. The Process Continued: From RA to Researcher

During Heather's initial period as an RA, Darlene mentored and trained her to conduct case-study research because the ultimate outcome of the research program involved the publication of a case-study book on poverty and education in Ontario (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011). There are many strengths of case studies, including their flexibility in addressing a wide variety of viewpoints (Merriam, 1998). This first stage of training included administrative tasks, analysing data, case study readings, and also the

beginnings of how to write draft cases from the texts collected. Through modeling, Darlene showed Heather how to interpret and be reflective as a researcher so each case was uniquely represented (Stake, 1995).

Heather's initial relationship with Darlene appeared to conform to what Johnson (2008) described as the traditional Researcher-RA approach: "At the outset of any faculty-student relationship, both parties often gravitate toward hierarchical and transactional frameworks for interaction" (p. 34). It was this working relationship that helped Heather to feel that she was a valued member of the research team. "Students who feel mentored are much more active participants in the world of research. They are more likely to realise research is occurring, and much more likely to appreciate its quality" (Lyons, Scroggins, & Rule, 1990, p. 277). As part of her RA responsibilities, Heather was expected to take field notes. Darlene provided detailed instructions on the process, took the time to review Heather's notes, and offered suggestions for improvement. Darlene also explained each step in the research process, as they were experiencing it, so Heather could grasp some of the intricacies of the work they were doing. She suggested articles and books for Heather to read, to gain a theoretical and methodological understanding of their case study and poverty and schooling work. During the group sessions, Heather observed the group and watched how Darlene led the groups through numerous open-ended questions. As the project evolved, so did Heather's responsibilities. Heather recalls vividly when Darlene asked her to lead the discussion of some of the questions. It was the beginning of a mentoring relationship, which fully blossomed during Heather's graduate research when Heather transitioned to being the lead researcher for her own project because of the stages of guidance provided by Darlene.

3.1. Transitioning to Heather's Narrative Inquiry Study

The evolution from RA to researcher was not an easy one. Darlene understood, as Kalin et al. (2009) explained, "if a mentoring relationship is to become a complex learning system where the sum of the participants exceeds their individual contributions, time is needed for aggregating understandings. For example, the mentee and the mentor should share, question and build knowledge together" (p. 356). Darlene led Heather through a process of gradual release of responsibility so that Heather began to see herself in a new light, while positioning herself in her new role. For example, Darlene and Heather spent hours reading transcripts from focus group sessions together, and systematically reviewing and analysing them for themes through coding, further research team discussions, further coding, and collapsing of themes and narratives from participants. The storied cases for each school site in Darlene's poverty project became exemplars for Heather's work as she began to imagine how she could shape an inquiry of her own. These many skills and experiences were valuable for her in her role as RA, but became essential when she began her own graduate research project. Darlene was skilled at teaching Heather the facets of case-study work. What came about through the process, however, was Darlene's own expertise and passion for the storied case, and her background in narrative inquiry from her prior work. Heather began to inquire further about narrative and Darlene steered her in the direction of more readings and studies, including school-based studies, which incorporated narrative inquiry.

The collaboration and modeling throughout the research process, accomplished by Heather and Darlene's intense engagement and thorough, active involvement during all stages of the research process, assisted Heather in developing her interest in qualitative research (Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006) and in particular the shift from case study to narrative study. In her thesis research project, entitled *Narratives of Experience in Education: Living and Working Through Poverty in a Rural Community* (Grenville, 2012), Heather met with participants individually and recorded, transcribed, and analysed her own transcripts, her own field notes and stories, as well as the stories the participants chose to share with her, using what she had learned and was still learning about narrative inquiry. Heather began to understand how "the narrative inquirer is immersed in relationship with participants, absorbed by their stories, simultaneously entertaining many insights about the material and tracking different directions for interpretation" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010, p. 270). Once the recordings were transcribed, Heather coded the data. The coding was done by organising and managing the most meaningful bits of data by assigning tags or labels to the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). "Narrative research, as a process involves many transitions on the way from field text to research text" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010, p. 272). This was a process Heather had undergone alongside Darlene in her role as an RA, but now felt confident enough to do on her own. After the coding process was complete, Heather looked for patterns and themes that emerged. "The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences" (Creswell, 2008, p. 521). These patterns were further subdivided and categorised through the identification of repeating patterns, stories, and words. From these patterns, Heather tried to interpret a larger meaning about the phenomenon of the study, which she presented as findings. Throughout each step in the research process, Darlene provided instruction and guidance on how to do a narrative inquiry study. Her expertise was vital to Heather's learning and success.

Now, in addition to being the principal investigator of her own project, Darlene was also Heather's research supervisor. She led Heather through the research process of her thesis work. She guided and corrected, she suggested revisions and supported Heather as she reached conclusions. The relationship between Darlene and Heather was evolving. "As the relationship evolves and as the protégé becomes increasingly secure and confident in the graduate student role, it is important for the relationship itself—including the roles of both parties—to change as well" (Johnson, 2008, p. 34). As Heather began to find her own way through the research process, Darlene no longer provided direct instruction, but worked with her and discussed possibilities with her. Heather continued to look to Darlene for guidance and Darlene continued to provide advice. Officially Darlene was Heather's thesis advisor; unofficially she was her confidant, listener, mentor, and an expert narrative inquirer working alongside her.

3.2. Mentorship

The relationship between Darlene and Heather evolved and shifted as they became wakeful to the process of transition, and as Heather began researching for and writing her graduate thesis. "Mentoring occurs when a senior person (the mentor in terms of age and experience) provides information, advice and emotional support to a junior person (i.e.,

the mentee) in a relationship lasting over an extended period of time" (Barrera, Braley, & Slate, 2010, p. 62). When Heather began the writing process for her M.Ed. thesis, Darlene continued to guide her through the research process, although this time it was Heather who was making the decisions as to which direction the research would go. Heather was led by the stirrings within her to ask questions about her childhood. It was these questions that guided the direction of her research and Darlene encouraged her to remain wakeful in these moments, to document her own journey within the journey of her research—a kind of field note of the field notes, or impressions of herself as a narrative inquirer. As documented in Subsection 4.1 below, Heather was going through a process of being wakeful in the journey. She recognised her childhood stories and questioned their meaning and value. Just as Elbaz-Luwisch (2010) described the relationship between participants and researchers, Heather too was in relationship (akin to a participant) but with her mentor, who provided critical insights and suggestions in order to guide and improve her research. Heather was learning her childhood stories were important.

The more time Heather spent alongside Darlene, the more open and established their relationship became. "Through increased interactions, mentoring relationships grow more emotionally intimate and deepen over time" (Gurvitch, Carson, & Beale, 2008, p. 254). As her mentor, Darlene provided cues and insights, helping her to be aware of the extent of the work and see some of its meaning (Knight & Trowler, 1999, p. 33). Rather than Darlene telling Heather the answers as she searched for meaning in her master's thesis work, both of them shared, questioned, and built knowledge together (Kalin, Barney, & Irwin, 2009). When it came time to look for themes from the transcripts from her research, Darlene asked Heather to go through the transcripts and isolate what she thought was important and relevant. They met in Darlene's office and discussed some themes Heather had identified. Heather's initial analysis highlighted many challenges participants identified in the community, such as unemployment, financial difficulties, and a transient community. Darlene asked questions such as, "Why is this important?" and "Why did you make these choices?" Her questions forced Heather to justify her interpretations. Darlene asked Heather to defend her choices while supporting her decisions. Darlene's experienced eyes saw things Heather's amateur eyes missed. She pointed out a simple theme Heather had entitled "Perceptions of a teacher," and suggested Heather delve further into this subject as it could relate to both her past educational experiences and her current teaching role. This theme evolved into one of the major threads of Heather's graduate paper. When Darlene supported Heather's choices and decisions as she coded and identified themes, Heather felt validated in her role as a researcher. Heather wanted to go home and dive further into the data she had collected. Expressing this in the poetic language of Kalin et al. (2009), Darlene called Heather into presence by listening for where Heather longed to lead (p. 356). Heather felt energised by her connection with Darlene. This connection boosted her self-esteem, increased her knowledge, and led to a desire for more connection (Schwartz & Holloway, 2012).

Through mentorship, Darlene provided opportunities for Heather to generate meaning rather than transfer predetermined knowledge (Kalin et al., 2009). Heather was able to build on the skills she learned as an RA in order to dig deeper into her thesis research. Their evolving mentorship, by now akin to friendship as colleagues, helped to build trust

and rapport (Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006). In speaking to her peers, Heather recognised her relationship with Darlene was special. She valued Darlene's input and her friendship.

> Students who experience and value these close connections with faculty, see the importance and uniqueness of these relationships and consciously express their respect for the positionality and boundaries that maintain the strength and definition of the relationship. Connection does not ask less of us as teachers and students, it asks far more of us all. (Schwartz & Holloway, 2012, p. 133)

It would have been easier for Darlene to leave Heather to struggle on her own through the research and the writing process of her thesis, but their strengthening relationship made Darlene willing to invest time and effort in the project, thus more effort exerted in the project by both parties.

4. Heather's Narrative: Experiences in Story Collection

In this section, Heather describes pivotal events in her journey through her evolving role from RA to graduate student that help contextualise the reasoned efforts described above. First, Heather provides a first-person narrative account of her journey called "Being Wakeful to a Narrative Revelation in the Mentorship Journey." Heather describes the fundamental experiences or stirrings in her journey over the past 5 years and as they relate to her research and collegial relationship with Darlene. The remainder of the section connects Heather's research journey experiences with other writings Heather composed while working with Darlene.

4.1. Being Wakeful to a Narrative Revelation in the Mentorship Journey

> It started at a large, urban elementary school in a large city in Ontario. Our purpose of being at the school that day was to lead parents, teachers, and administrators though a series of guided questions in order to understand their experiences at the school. During the focus group sessions, my mind wandered as my eyes explored the room. It was large, well-lit, and covered in student art. The overall atmosphere and sense of community was very different from the small, rural school I had attended as a student. Throughout the day, Darlene encouraged me to write down my impressions and thoughts. Part of my reflection read:
>
> > Before today, I was expecting to arrive in a scary place—perhaps a school with metal detectors at the door. I was quite surprised to be welcomed to a cheery, rather large school. The inside of the building was well kept, clean, and neat. . . . I was stunned by the enthusiasm and excitement of the teachers we met. . . . Overall, I was impressed and overwhelmed by the daily struggles faced by everyone at the school. It was

> definitely a worthwhile experience. (Heather's field note, November 20, 2007)

Before embarking on this research venture with Darlene, any research I had been a part of was purely quantitative in nature. After all, I completed my undergraduate degree in science, and during that time I was taught to appreciate numeric values and assessments, and evaluate results based solely on their statistical significance. I learned that accuracy, precision, and reproducible results are the hallmarks of good, quantitative research. However, after the very first day of working with Darlene, I realised that this would not be the case for this project. The easiest thing for me to do would have been to continue to work as an RA, standing on the periphery, taking notes while chronicling the events of the day, and completing my duties as outlined in my RA job description. My science background had trained me to step away from and keep any research I was doing at a distance from my personal experiences. At the time, I did not realise how difficult it would be to break away from this type of thinking.

During the poverty project as Darlene and I studied elementary school experiences across Ontario and in the years that followed as I completed my master's thesis, my personal, professional, and academic life became further intertwined. I was surprised by the levels of poverty that I witnessed during the site visits with Darlene. The visits, the experiences, and the stirrings from inside were leaving a mark on me. I began to look at myself, and the experiences I was having, in a new light. Finding value and knowledge in experience is an age-old process. These stories, these narratives of experience, are personal, because they reflect a person's life history, and social, because they reflect the place and the contexts in which teachers live (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). I was finding value in the stories being shared and I was coming to the realisation that there was value in my own story. "The living out of participants' and researchers' stories, separately and together, in a process of interaction, is the essence of narrative inquiry" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010, p. 267). I kept this notion close to my heart during the latter part of my research journey, but recalled an earlier reflection of what I believed when I was enrolled in a course in 2008. I was asked to describe myself. I wrote:

> I first see myself as a teacher who has no experience working in challenging circumstances. My first teaching experience was at a senior school (Grades 10-12) in Darwin, Australia, where only the most studious habits were tolerated. While in Australia I saw the black and white (literal) lines between the have and have-not cultures. While visiting our research sites, I realised that it is also apparent in Canada, and far more rampant than I previously expected. (Heather's M.Ed. course reflection, Sept 26, 2008)

Upon reading this excerpt now, I realise how far I have come on this journey of discovery. From someone who thought she "has no experience working in challenging circumstances" to where I am today as I continue to reconcile my new understandings of the community where I grew up to the community where I now teach, where poverty is a part of everyday life for many of my students. A *narrative revelation* "allows them to reframe their lived experiences, to reframe the relationship between a life (of poverty) and a narrative (of poverty) as it relates to children. . . . Reframing perspective is pivotal to changing mindsets and, ultimately, to *reliving* with new experience" (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012, p. 15). This process of revelation and reframing brought me closer to my work as a researcher and helped me to gain a better understanding of who I was and who I wanted to be as a teacher.

As we spent more time working together, I continued to gain respect for Darlene as a narrative researcher and a professional. I came to view our mentoring relationship as pivotal in my academic life and career development and held, and continue to hold, my mentor in high regard (Gurvitch, Carson, & Beale, 2008). I also came to respect Darlene as a colleague who openly shared her personal and professional experiences with others. This was her way of being in her world as a narrative inquirer, and she was teaching me to live narratively too. During the focus groups, Darlene often shared personal narratives from her childhood, growing up as a child of immigrants. Over and over again, I saw how Darlene opened up a sensitive part of herself, in order to make the focus group participants more comfortable. In the same way, Darlene and I began conversing about my life, my childhood, and my experiences.

Darlene evolved into my mentor and became so much more than my research supervisor. She often asked thought-provoking questions that prompted me to begin an exploration of my elementary-education experiences. It was uncomfortable for me to open the door to this line of questioning, but I knew that if I wanted to become a researcher and complete a thesis project that I could be proud of, it was necessary. I was learning about myself, but also a lot about professional research and about the value of narrative inquiry. While we were working on the poverty project, Darlene was asked to make a presentation about her work to her colleagues. I felt valued when she asked me to participate alongside her. I said:

> Darlene has been great to work with. She has been extremely patient with me, and always takes the time to explain her expectations, and the reasons why we are doing what we're doing. This has really helped me to learn about the research process and understand the subtleties involved. (Heather at Brock University research colloquium, November 28, 2008)

> Looking back on this quote, only now do I realise how rare my mentorship experience was during the research process. It would have been much easier for Darlene to assign my duties and expect results, but I believe she wanted me to find personal value in what we were doing together. I always felt that Darlene saw potential in me, even when I did not see it for myself. By making an investment in me, Darlene's knowledge and experiences have been passed forward and will continue to grow with any further research I do. Darlene's method seems to be aligned with the observation of Lyons et al. (1990) regarding mentoring graduate students: graduates who feel a part of the research enterprise in their chosen disciplines, have a much greater likelihood of making contributions, both to the development of knowledge in their fields and the development of such attitudes among any students with whom they might interact in their professional lives (p. 277).

Darlene, and the poverty research we had undertaken, was influential in my decision to complete my thesis, focusing on my own childhood experiences in a community affected by poverty as well as in my current community as a teacher in a high-poverty school (Grenville, 2012). Lyons et al. (1990) indicated, "the graduate supervisor/advisor is the graduate student's official link to the university in matters of policy and planning" (p. 277), but Darlene also helped me to push forward to take my own risks in research. Darlene continued to be a pivotal factor to my research interests and so I decided to model my research after hers. As I began the writing process for my thesis, there were several challenges I had to overcome, including: (a) viewing and understanding my childhood experiences as affected by poverty, (b) deficit thinking about children and families living in poverty, and (c) the role poverty plays in the lives of the students and my colleagues at the school where I currently teach.

4.2. Narratives of Childhood Experiences

Throughout the writing process, it became apparent to me that the experiences of working with Darlene had greatly influenced me and would continue to inspire the direction the thesis would take. In reference to the work I did as Darlene's RA, I wrote:

> As I listened to the stories of teachers, administrators, and parents . . . I began to wonder about the challenges experienced by my hometown that as a child perhaps my parents sheltered me from, or I was too self-absorbed in my own childhood to notice. These reflections led to my desire to explore critical incidents from my childhood and dig deeper to find meaning and understanding in order to reconcile these events with my current role as a teacher. (Grenville, 2012, p. 4)

It was a struggle for me to comprehend that my childhood had been influenced by poverty, both in my own home and in my community. Darlene guided me through the process of understanding my childhood through the lens of narrative inquiry. It was a process that began with probing questions Darlene had been asking since the initial site visits during the initial poverty project. She encouraged me to think and write about moments in time that I did not initially recognise as significant, but I could see how important those moments were when I looked back. I was beginning to see life through narrative, "enacted in storied moments in time and space, and reflected upon in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). This lens helped me to see several of my childhood experiences in a new light, and with this new perspective I also burrowed deep to address other personal issues that had been brought to light, first during the site visits I attended with Darlene and later as themes that emerged in my thesis research project.

4.3. Deficit Thinking About Children and Families Living in Poverty

Through my thesis research project, I began to identify some of the stereotypes I carried. I began to recognise that these stereotypes "can lead educators to express low expectations for low income students and their families or to blame them for the very symptoms of their repression" (Gorski, 2012, p. 313). Specifically, I addressed my deficit thinking and the effect it had on my role as a teacher in the high-poverty rural school where I still work. I wrote:

> In my role as an RA (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010; Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011), I witnessed many of the stereotypes teachers brought with them regarding families living in poverty. . . . It was at these sessions where I began to recognise the stereotypes I brought with me to the classroom, my own deficit model thinking, and I identified why I needed to change my personal philosophy and understanding of my teaching practice. (Grenville, 2012, pp. 49-50)

It was much easier for me to identify how others made assumptions and stereotyped, than it was for me to identify these within myself. I had to start searching within myself for critical answers with which I had tension. The tensions came not only from my past experiences but also as a present-day researcher learning more about poverty and school, and stereotyping. Each day, as a teacher, I see poverty in my classroom. At times, I feel like I have to be a detective, speaking to resource teachers within the school to find out what the "home situation" is for many of my students. Inquiries with administrators, counsellors, and child and youth workers have become a weekly routine. I was astounded by both the number of students living in

poverty at the school where I work, as well as the level of poverty some students were experiencing.

From the research I did with Darlene, I knew there were no easy answers to solving the problems of poverty in schools, but the true challenges came when I needed to step outside myself and look critically at my own teaching, as well as how I treated and perceived my colleagues. The biases and stereotyping I carried within me were very difficult for me to identify. As I wrote, and re-wrote, my personal practical experiences began to shape me as a researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). At the beginning of my thesis research project, I wrote stories describing the context where I currently teach: a rural secondary school where many families are affected by poverty. I wrote of a colleague whose pedagogy was very perplexing to me. For the sake of anonymity, I use the pseudonym Mr. Baxter for this colleague:

> Mr. Baxter was hired to our school as a member of the arts department. He was hired to a thriving program. Ten years later, at a time when arts programs in neighbouring schools are experiencing a revival of interest, the subject he teaches at our school has crumbled to one class per year. . . . Due to the lowered enrolment, Mr. Baxter's teaching load has shifted away from the courses he is passionate about and is heavily weighted with his other teachable subjects.
>
> It is as though teaching overwhelms Mr. Baxter. It seems that he is constantly exasperated or in conflict with a student, a parent, or the administration. . . . I wonder if Mr. Baxter has reached his breaking point, or if his passion for his profession has been lost. It seems that everyone and everything is against him.
>
> This semester, Mr. Baxter and I have several of the same students. Although I enjoy having these students in my class, they seem to antagonise Mr. Baxter. . . . I often wonder why teachers like Mr. Baxter remain in the teaching profession. (Grenville, 2012, pp. 70-72)

As I look back on this excerpt, I can see now that I was judging Mr. Baxter without any consideration for his place on the landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) and what he was going through himself in the time that had passed at the school before my own tenure began there. I did not consider how his own sociality with students and his subject matter affected his passion for the curriculum. My perspective changed as I worked through the writing process of my thesis with Darlene. Now, I realise the many complexities and day-to-day dilemmas faced by teachers and students alike,

and I see that there are no easy answers or solutions. At the beginning of my thesis study, I was quick to judge my colleagues, their teaching styles, and their personal interactions with students. I was blinded to the obstacles and intricacies that played into classroom dynamics (Grenville & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013). I began making changes in my classroom to reflect my new understandings, and changes that were less judgmental of the contexts in which my students and colleagues lived.

I provide here an example. During my first year as a teacher in Ontario, I was fortunate to be hired to a school that had just undergone a major building renovation. My classroom was brand new and included a SMARTboard®. Coincidently, the curriculum also changed that year and the school purchased new textbooks for one of the courses I was teaching. I did not allow the textbooks to be taken home, as the students all had access to a digital version of them that they could access online. However, as my work with Darlene continued, I realised I was making assumptions about my students' home lives, based on my own middle-class stereotypes. I was wrong to assume that all the students had Internet access at home.

4.4. The Role Poverty Plays at the School Where Heather Teaches

My teaching strategies and how I approach my students, as well as how I see myself as a researcher was born out of a journey from a longitudinal case-study project on poverty and schooling. However, all these changes have been brought about because of the mentoring relationship developed between Darlene and me through the narrative inquiry thesis journey I embarked on afterward. It was through the process of sharing, questioning, and building knowledge together (Kalin et al., 2009) that I found I was able to identify as a researcher, and also as a change agent in my current teaching practice.

In my current teaching role, the experiences I have had as an RA, graduate student, and researcher have shaped my classroom and how I approach students and their learning. I have taken the road less travelled and completed a narrative inquiry of poverty in a rural community that mirrored my own past experiences. Ultimately, I was led to a place where I was able to see my current teaching practices in a new light. This newfound perspective would not have been possible if it were not for the fulfilling journey of RA to researcher. Each step in the journey, from taking narrative field notes, to gaining an understanding of narrative inquiry methodology, to learning strategies for collecting data for narrative inquiry, was pivotal for my understanding in becoming the teacher and researcher I am today. But, more important, my research journey has helped me to identify my personal stereotypes and biases, and I work each and every day to address those biases and find ways to work through them for the best interests of my students. I often share my experiences with my colleagues in the hope that

> they can continue to understand further the context in which our students live. When teachers share stories, the entire school community can change. For example, in discussions with my administrators in this past year, I spoke of my disappointment that a breakfast program was not offered at our school. We shared stories of students and student stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), and it was obvious that we both understood the need for such a program at our school. A few months later, a few teacher volunteers started a breakfast program with the support of the administrative team. The first day, 25 students came. The second day, there were more than 50, and so it continued. Immediately, the program was a success with the students, but the long-term benefits may extend further than anyone could have imagined. Many were surprised by the success of the program. They were astounded that so many students were coming to school hungry. Many teachers knew students who came to school without lunch, but they had never considered the possibility that this was not a choice, but that they had no other option. Teachers have expressed their astonished disbelief both casually in the staffroom during lunch, and publicly at staff meetings. Their stories show that they may have begun their own narrative revelation (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012) regarding the life experiences of our students. Teachers' stories, their personal practical knowledge, are the stories teachers live and tell of who they are and what they know (Clandinin et al., 2006). I continue to explore my new perceptions and share my stories with teachers in the hope that we will continue to find new understandings.

5. Darlene's Narrative: A Research Supervisor's Perspective

In this section, Darlene provides a reflection from her perspective on the relationship between herself and Heather as it evolved from RA-researcher to student-supervisor. Darlene reflects on this journey:

> Education is about relationship. My relationship with Heather has been an educative one, with a critical reflective piece to a puzzle she discovers in her *wakefulness*. From what Heather has revealed in her writing about her research journey, I see that her personal practical knowledge is "a way of understanding how curriculum is lived and experienced in educative ways through story" (Ciuffetelli Parker et al., 2011, p. 7). Personal practical knowledge is a term that Connelly and Clandinin (1988) introduced as a way of understanding knowledge based on our past experiences. For Heather, it might have been much easier for her not to have burrowed deeply into her past experiences and, as she admits, "The easiest thing for me to do would have been to continue to work . . . standing on the periphery, taking notes." However, Heather took the road less travelled and although it was "uncomfortable for [her] to open the door . . . to this line of questioning . . . it was necessary." It was necessary because she had experienced the "stirrings," that caused the tension, that evoked the feelings of a time and space where she understood the familiarity of poverty, of

marginalisation, and of the stories of childhood that resurfaced for her while we lived alongside each other in this research journey.

Living alongside is akin to living in relationship because we are open to seeing another's perspective. I mentored Heather, yes, but the mentorship was not solely based on teaching the factual how-to of qualitative research (of case-study methodology or narrative inquiry methodology); rather, the mentoring relationship was formed by our shared personal practical knowledge and narratives of experience in the process of *doing* the research together, and making discoveries along the way too.

Stories are powerful enactors. For Heather, she was able to identify and "to see life through narrative," along the continuum. In turn, her retelling of her narratives of experience allowed her to "identify some of the stereotypes [she] carried" as a practicing teacher in a school affected by poverty. This being wakeful to, indeed, was pivotal to Heather's knowledge journey and, I would argue, the crux of our relationship, and this article, because it illustrates the shift her journey took through this epiphany. I recall clearly the day she shared her wonder of whether she had grown up poor. Heather remembers pausing, creating a moment of enlightenment for both of us: to be awake to the moment is sophisticated research ability, and very few novice researchers have this ability. I made sure I capitalised on the moment for Heather, but for me too as her guide learning the phenomenon of narrative, as it always brings new insights even to seasoned narrativists.

To be awake, to wonder about, to push to the boundary, to go to the place less travelled, is to have courage to see what awaits, what new discoveries can be made about the research, about findings, about predisposed assumptions too. Heather took the risk to unravel the deeper complexities of poverty and schooling, stereotyping, and deficit ways of thinking about children and families by revisiting her own stories of childhood. The awakening allowed Heather to hold a mirror to her lived present-day experiences in her research and in her teaching practices. Such is the phenomenon of narrative inquiry, as it can lead you to places unplanned.

Heather's research topic was born from her journey alongside me as my research assistant and, following, our journey continued with me living alongside her as her thesis supervisor. Together we told, retold, and lived storied experiences that added depth and breadth to her research discoveries. In the midst, Heather was wakened to relive her narrative, to consider the untold story that was revealed. Reliving is a difficult act, as Connelly (2011) conceded, "Reliving the untold story is easier said than done" (p. xi). Heather herself acknowledged, "There were no easy answers to solving the problems . . . the true challenges came when I needed to step outside myself to look critically at my own teaching." Reliving a new narrative is difficult, indeed. "Reliving means living on edge, in tension, among intersecting,

> competing, narrative threads" (Connelly, 2011, p. xii). Heather is living on edge, in relationship, and among intersecting narrative threads—and that has made all the difference.

6. Conclusion

Recently, one of Heather's students began regularly skipping classes. Due to personal issues, he was not comfortable in the classroom setting. Heather worked with him, his mother, and the school resource teacher to find appropriate accommodations for him. Heather invited him to come to her classroom at lunch for extra help. Heather spent time over the examination break working with him to complete outstanding assignments to bring up his mark. Heather was in constant communication with his mother. In the past, Heather may have dismissed this student and not pursued the reasons for his truancies. Instead, Heather listened to his stories. Heather listened, being wakeful to his difficulties. Heather tried to understand his life space, and provide accommodations to meet his learning needs. With her newfound understandings of the challenges some students face, Heather worked with the student to meet his academic goals. Xu and Connelly (2010) described further: "For narrative inquiry for school-based research this means thinking of practical school settings as life spaces to be entered into during inquiry. This space and its structure is a practical, concrete, construct which defines the experience, the phenomenon, under study" (p. 356). Heather hopes the experiences she has shared in this article can be the starting point for beginning school-based scholars like herself to incorporate narrative inquiry into their own practices, and to pay attention to experience as a source of knowledge in school-based research.

Heather has come to recognise how full-circle her educational journey has been. Each step along the path has influenced her passage and has been pivotal for her understanding and development as a researcher. Having been part of a successful mentoring partnership, Heather now has a greater understanding of the importance of working with students and she has been able to take some of the positive aspects of this partnership and incorporate it into her teaching. Through narrative inquiry, mentorship, and experience Heather has learned and continues to learn about the importance of considering context when approaching a situation. If education is about relationships (as Darlene stated above), Heather has been fortunate to have experienced positive relationships throughout her educational journey and, through mentorship, hopes to pass these positive aspects onto her students.

Heather has learned about being wakeful through narrative on critical topics such as poverty, deficit thinking, and the power of mentorship, and she continues to learn. This journey has been a *narrative reformation* (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013). Heather has gained remarkable insights that have come about as a result of her relationship with Darlene, first as a research assistant, and later as a thesis student. Being wakeful during this journey has allowed her to draw upon her own lived experiences to reform her understanding of herself, her teaching practices, and her students from marginalised communities.

Heather has been fortunate to find a supportive, nurturing mentor. Through this process, Heather has learned how personal, professional, and academic lives can become intertwined. Heather now sees herself "*in the midst*—located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63), not at the beginning but far from the end of her journey. Heather has begun to reframe her perspective (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2012) but recognises that this is an ongoing and never-ending process.

Heather hopes that this article will waken both student researchers and their supervisors to the possibilities and benefits of pursuing this type of storied practice through the research journey. Whether in the role of a researcher working with an RA, or a thesis advisor working with a graduate student, reflecting on experiential practices in partnership, about the research journey itself, holds much potential. By being wakeful, there is the potential that these partnerships can create a "moment of enlightenment" as illustrated in this article. As a graduate student, the benefits of a positive research journey through relationship with her supervisor are numerous, as outlined throughout this article. In her case, Heather learned the intricacies of the research process through modeling and the ongoing support of her mentor. Heather has also gained a better understanding of herself, being wakeful in a mentorship journey about methodology, poverty, and deficit thinking. "What is most important is the authenticity of the mentorship itself" (Ciuffetelli Parker & McQuirter Scott, 2010, p. 423), which can only be achieved if both parties are willing to actively engage in the process. Positive mentoring relationships can shape the next generation of researchers, as both parties remain wakeful in the process.

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