

Honouring Roles: The Story of a Principal and a Student

Jerome Cranston

University of Manitoba

Abstract

The importance of the teacher-student relationship in educational practice is well established, as is the idea of principal leadership in relationship to staff. Even though principal leadership is regarded as a factor in student success, the principal's effect is usually assumed to take place via the teaching staff. There is an absence of research about the "lived experience" of direct principal-student relationships that shed lights on the ways in which these relationships play a role in student success and principal transformation. This paper presents two narratives written about a particular set of principal-student interactions experienced by the researcher (principal) and participant (student). The analysis uses a narrative inquiry approach to explore both the individual and collective meanings of this principal-student relationship. The stories and their derived meanings have the potential to enliven and influence educational practice as they explore the subtleties of the principal-student relationship.

Keywords: principal-student relationships; lived experience; narrative inquiry

Jerome Cranston is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. He researches and teaches as part of an interdisciplinary, international "community of inquiry" on topics of educational leadership and social justice.

Email: Jerome.Cranston@ad.umanitoba.ca

I always felt you were completely the authority figure, you know the person who runs the school who is a little scary, a little bit scary at least. [But], I think that for once in my life there was actually someone who listened to me when I spoke, believed me and could hold my story safe.

Anique at age 21 years

Introduction

The primacy of the teacher-student relationship as critically important to the educative process has been explored from many different orientations and perspectives (Freire, 2003; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Pianta, 1999; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004; Shor, 1992; Stipek, 2006). In general, positive teacher-student relationships are believed to be a necessary substrate for effective teaching and learning to occur (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Bondy & Ross, 2008).

Various theoretical perspectives support the centrality of the teacher-student relationship. Some models of education have suggested that the teacher-student relationship is a nested influence that affects other spheres of a child's interactions with the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Other learning theories have placed the teacher in a significant relation to the student as someone who scaffolds the growth of the learner (Vygotsky, 1978), while yet others have suggested that teacher-student relationships are central to notions of student engagement (Stipek, 2006). While an increasing concern for the centrality of the teacher-student relationship is apparent, how this relationship is conceptualized, theorized, and practiced, varies considerably. For some, the critical aspect of the relationship is what happens "between" the teacher and student (Hartrick Doane, 2002).

Regardless of the theoretical perspective through which one studies the teacher-student relationship, it seems clear that for teachers, being in a relationship with students through their learning experiences is significant.

The Relational Nature of Education

The teacher-student relationship has also been thought of as a relational connectedness. Goodlad (1990) proposed that teaching is inherently a moral enterprise and that the kind and quality of relationship that occurs between teachers and students profoundly influences what is learned and how it is learned. Relational connectedness describes a basic bond of the relationship such that, as human beings we live to relate; connectivity being basic to our humanity (Bennett, 1997, 2003; Palmer 1998).

While researchers are increasingly exploring what is meant by positive teacher-student relationships and why they are important, little is known about the effects of principal-student relationships on student success despite the fact that principals are seen as influencing student achievement both directly through principal leadership and indirectly through the quality of relationships they have with all of the members of the school community (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; McEwan, 2002). Testimony from principals and students about the formative nature of positive principal-student interactions is certainly less common than accounts of teacher-student interaction.

Narrative as Inquiry

The paper employs a narrative inquiry research approach, one in which researchers write about their experiences and then discuss their understandings of those experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative research is, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Montero and Washington (2011) contend, about understanding experience as lived and told in stories that capture unquantifiable personal and human dimensions of life. Narrative inquiry has value because the re-storying of experience has the potential to create a new sense of meaning and understanding, not only for the author of the narrative, but also for others who work in similar professional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling to explore the complexity of life from a human-centered perspective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher then writes a narrative of the experience. Clandinin and Connelly noted that we are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is, in fact, the study of the ways humans experience the world (Van Manen, 1990).

Rather than selecting randomly from the many possible principal-student interactions that I lived through as a school principal, I chose to use a “critical events” narrative inquiry approach to determine the specific narrative that is highlighted below, and to inform the process of its analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In “critical events” approaches to narrative inquiry, one looks at incidents that are particularly inspired or charged with meaning or nuance; events become critical when they have the right mix of ingredients at the right time and in the right context (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Ultimately, as Webster and Mertova posited, what makes an event critical is the impact it has had on the storyteller. This approach to narrative inquiry allows the narrative to function as both phenomenon and method (Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Challenges to Narrative Inquiry Approaches to Research

While some might argue that narratives are socially constructed and therefore only forms of fiction, and as such not worthy instruments for research and/or learning, the fictive nature of narratives does not invalidate them (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). There is no evidence that narratives are less valid than the facts and opinions individuals write on surveys; we make claims for who we are and who we would like to be in the stories we tell and how we tell them (Aranda & Street, 2001; Mischler, 1999).

Thus, in telling this story I acknowledge that my narrator’s knowledge, like that of other individuals, is constrained by my own historicity (Hall, 1999). Accordingly, in order to broaden both the reader’s and my understanding of the story, I enlisted the other subject of the narrative as co-creator. While one person can recount a dialogue with some accuracy, two people’s accounts of the same phenomenon create a view that gives the story a multi-dimensional view of a shared reality. Respecting that “different perspectives bring different skills and values to the

table” (Haller & Kleine, 2001), this paper is strengthened significantly by the presence of the student’s perspective.

Although my eight-year-long story of being a principal contains recollections of hundreds of students, only one story was chosen for the purposes of challenging, enlivening, and exploring the discourse around this underrepresented set of relationships in schools. The story that is presented for analysis explores the nature of one pivotal set of principal-student interactions that occurred throughout one academic year that can be presented in a manner that both retains anonymity for the student and illustrates the tone and texture of the relationship, so that the underlying relational ethics become unearthed.

To protect the student, pseudonyms have been given to all persons mentioned in the narrative except for the author. In 2004, the University of Manitoba’s Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board approved a study using a narrative inquiry approach to explore a series of stories of shared experience written by the author and the narratives’ subjects, specifically two former students and a teacher who had remained in contact with the author after his departure from the school. These narratives are drawn from that study.

Story One: A Student Named Anique

Before the first day of school, I tried to read through all of the new students’ files with a hope that I might discover something that would help me feel like I knew something about each of them. This habit was based on the rational belief that I might glean something meaningful, but it was probably a desperate maneuver meant to make me feel a bit empowered in my role. To be aware of each and every student at my school would be to somehow know my school thoroughly. And a principal who knew his school thoroughly had a chance at being a good principal.

There was also a social dimension to my scouring the files in advance of the academic year. I searched to find any background information that might stand out so that when I met a new student in the hallway I would be able to say something, just anything, about the adolescent I had just encountered.

I did not remember hearing much about Anique until around mid-September. When I had opened Anique’s file in August, I was drawn to the fact that she had begun kindergarten as “Anique Daigneault,” but in fourth grade had become “Anique Wilson.” The note in her file stated that she had taken the name of her adoptive parents, “Carol and Fred Wilson” at age ten. All this information told me was that during the four years of school from kindergarten to Grade four she had been “Daigneault,” but was now “Wilson.” Any clues pointing to why and how that significant change for a child had happened were absent. The file also contained a recent picture of Anique. While that information was helpful, it was a series of telephone calls and a year of spontaneous conversations that would imprint Anique in my mind and heart, and develop my understanding of her complex lived experience in a way a file probably never could. While my interaction with her did not lessen my understanding of the necessity of roles for both principals and students, it did fundamentally change my understanding of the way students and principals can be mutually implicated in the profound process that is learning.

The first phone call I received was from a woman who introduced herself as Anique’s “great aunt” but admitted a few minutes into our conversation that she was not really an aunt but

rather a friend of the family. In reality, she might have been best described as a benefactor of Anique's father. The conversation was more of a monologue focused on convincing me that Anique's father was not as bad as some people had made him out to be. This was not hard for me to accept since I knew nothing about Anique's father. She explained how she had known him, for a while, before he went to jail. She tried to describe how he was not to blame for all of the suffering Anique experienced in her life even though, Anique's aunt insisted, Anique's mother's side of the family blamed him for everything.

Next, she inquired about how Anique was doing at school and then asked if it was okay if she told Anique's father about her progress and asked if she could tell him to call me, to talk about Anique. I am not sure why I agreed to the request, but I told her to tell him that he could call me.

Not long after that call ended, I had Anique's file pulled to re-read it. There was nothing in it about her father or mother. Later that afternoon, I had Anique paged to my office and I explained to her that I had had an unusual phone conversation with her "Auntie Payette," who I knew was not really her aunt. I attempted to explain the conversation and how the woman seemed intent on brokering some contact between Anique and her father through me.

After I uttered that last sentence Anique's eyes grew wide with recognition. She raised her head, her eyebrows rose up on her forehead and Anique said she did know who this lady was. The woman had taken in her father when he was having troubles. Anique said her adoptive parents would never permit her to talk to her father or even get letters from him, and that she had been told there was a court order to prevent contact between them.

I admitted to Anique that I did not know what was going on and that I was most certainly feeling very confused by all of this. I told her that I thought that I should contact the Wilsons and tell them about the phone conversation and ask them to help explain it.

Anique's look suddenly changed to one of fear as she begged me not to call the Wilsons. She said she had been in contact with her father through her two older siblings. If the Wilsons found out, she would be in serious trouble. She insisted that if I told the Wilsons her life would be considerably more difficult.

I looked at Anique and saw what looked like the seeds of panic. I reluctantly agreed to keep the conversation with Auntie Payette to myself, but only for the time being. I had no real idea what I was agreeing to and hoped that I had not just committed one of those career-limiting moves I had been warned against ever making.

Anique went on to provide me with some details about her life. Her mother was in an institution, incapable of functioning on her own and had been there for some time. A real aunt and uncle, named Carol and Fred Wilson, had adopted her when she was about 10 years old after she had spent a few years in care, a foster home, where she had been placed after her father had hurt her and her two older brothers. I gathered from this that Anique had been placed with the Wilsons due to a breach of a standard of care. But, I also knew it was, more accurately reflected in what she termed as, "neglect and just some other stuff."

I knew immediately that I did not want to know what "some other stuff" might mean but got the sense from the way she said the word "stuff" that it was something dreadfully painful for a child to endure.

Anique despised Carol and Fred. According to her, they made her change her name and move in with them, very far away from her brothers. The Wilsons did not like any of her friends

and they spied on her all of the time. She was placed under house arrest for no reason. The Wilsons never trusted her and worst of all they could never find anything good in her, she said. No matter what she might accomplish they would remind her that she was only one step away from her next mistake and ruining her life.

When that conversation ended I sent Anique back to her classroom, too embarrassed to admit that I could not really make much sense of it. While I had grown up in a hectic home, and could empathize with some of her struggles, trying to identify with the depth of pain that Anique was expressing was beyond what I understood.

Over the following few weeks I got to know Anique and, unfortunately, I got to know the Wilsons better as Anique's school life became increasingly tumultuous. Anique was caught breaking school rules and was increasingly getting into trouble with staff by being rude, belligerent, and defiant. I had to call the Wilsons to explain why she was receiving so many detentions and alert them to the fact that if nothing changed, she would certainly be suspended from the school and might possibly be expelled.

Each time I spoke to one of the Wilsons, I heard how they had tried their best with Anique but nothing was working. They had raised their own children who had turned out just fine, but Anique was just one problem after another. Something was wrong with Anique they suggested and they confided that they were at their wits end in knowing what to do about Anique. Did I have any suggestions to offer, in how to deal with an out-of-control teenager?

I fumbled through the sad excuses that I had no teenagers and I was not in a position to offer parenting advice. I knew what do with Anique at school, I would say, but I could not tell them how to raise their adopted daughter.

Sometime before Thanksgiving I received another phone call from someone else wanting to know how Anique was doing. It was a real aunt this time who had heard that Anique might be suspended or even expelled. She was concerned about how Anique was handling things, but was also calling because she hoped that I would not expel Anique. She asked me how well I knew Anique. I replied that I was getting to know her a little bit better each day.

She went on to confirm much of what I had heard from Anique. After the Wilsons adopted her at age 10, they had moved her far away from her childhood home, changed her surname, forced her to take their religion and severed as many ties to her former self as they could. The Wilsons were trying to distance Anique physically, emotionally and psychologically from her father and his family. The Wilsons, who were on Anique's mother's side of the family, blamed her father for all of Anique's suffering and her mother's illnesses.

I wondered as I listened how Anique made sense of any of this. At age thirty-four I was having a difficult time trying to make sense of Anique's life. After my reassurance that I would not just give up on Anique, the conversation ended.

I did not bother to call Anique down after this phone call, as I did not know what to say to her. However, I called her to my office a few days later, just before Thanksgiving when I received another phone call, this one from Anique's father asking about her wellbeing.

"Hello Mr. Cranston? We have never met, but I am Anique Wilson's father, Serge Daigneault. If it is not too much trouble I was wondering if you could tell me how Anique is doing? How is she doing in French? What are her friends like? Is she behaving herself?" he asked.

I never expected a call from Anique's father, not really, even though I had said I was willing to receive one. As I listened it seemed as if he was genuinely interested in Anique. But, I did not really know. I wondered if my thoughts were nothing but a reflection of a hope that I held that a father might be concerned about his daughter. For a moment, I caught myself thinking about my three children and hoped that when I spoke about them that people would think I loved them.

I was short in my replies: "Fine;" "Fine;" "Fairly nice;" and "Most of the time." The phone call only lasted a few minutes and my brief answers seemed to suffice, or maybe he sensed the caution in the tone of my voice to offer him anything more.

Mr. Daigneault ended the phone call by asking if he could write to me and asked if I might be willing to write back to let him know how Anique was doing at school. I was hesitant to agree but said I thought it would be okay for me to receive the letters. Then, surprisingly, Mr. Daigneault asked if he could send me photographs of Anique from when she was little, before everything had happened.

I was not sure what I was supposed to say. It did seem odd, worrisome even, that he wanted to send me baby pictures. However, I also felt uncomfortable flatly denying his offer, and so I agreed.

He never sent any pictures. He never wrote to me. He never phoned me again. I never heard from Serge Daigneault after that single telephone call.

Over the remainder of the year, Anique would come by my office to talk about once or twice a week. Anique would walk up to my office entrance between classes, stop and ask if I was busy. If I said "no," she would bite her bottom lip on one side, frown a little and ask if we could talk. She would come in, sit down, drop her head a bit forward so that her bangs covered her eyes, and begin to talk.

Sometimes she talked about her father. Anique would say that she felt that he was pushing her to let him back into her life. She would say she did not know what to do with her mixed-up feelings towards him. I would ask her what she thought she wanted to do and she would reply that she was not ready to let him back into her life, at least not yet. She said, "she had totally forgiven him," but was not sure she was ready to have him back in her life. All I knew to do was to encourage Anique to listen to herself. I was hesitant to counsel her, but thought that it was important for her to learn to listen carefully to her thoughts as she considered making decisions.

I would almost always end these conversations by telling Anique that she should not push herself, in terms of relationships, any faster than she was comfortable with and that she should not beat herself up with the fact that she felt torn about her feelings towards her father.

From time-to-time we talked about her friendships at school. More than once I told Anique that she seemed to be so needy for affection that she would become involved with anyone who paid attention to her. I always knew at these times that I was counseling her, but I felt confident that advising her on how to relate with other students was part of my responsibility as principal. Anique admitted that some of her friends at the school took advantage of her naïveté, and then after she said something foolish they would ridicule her in front of her peers. Without telling her that she needed new friends, even though that is what I thought, I tried to explain that this was not what friendship was really about.

It was not often, but sometimes Anique wanted to talk about teenage boys and her thoughts about boys. She would ask me what I thought about the ways teenage boys acted. I was always self-conscious about these conversations because, I think, I knew that while it was important that she be accepted as a whole person and not have yet another person cut her off, I had to avoid crossing a boundary into something too personal in our dialogues. These conversations, which seemed to be simple, were the ones I worried about the most because the gulf usually created by these titles of ours seemed to dissolve a little bit more during them.

I had read about the importance of principals nurturing authentic, warm, and caring relationships with students and found myself right in the middle of an authentic, warm and caring relationship with Anique. We seemed to arrive at a place of equivalence, through the mutual trust we had developed over time. Equivalent in our humanity, equivalent in our desire to understand wrongdoing in the world, and similarly committed to having a cordial and real exchange we proceeded with simple openness to process through the developing storyline and challenges she faced. At times, though neither of us ever probably forgot I was the figurehead of the school, the confines of titles like “principal” and “student,” seemed to dissolve.

I never mistook myself as some champion of advocacy efforts on the behalf of Anique, or substitute counselor or life-long friend. As the principal of the school I hoped only to be doing that job well. But I realize, as I look back on it, how humanizing this difficult period in Anique’s life was for both of us as we processed through it in our ongoing conversations. I do not believe that fact was ever articulated, just felt. While the conversations were often about seemingly superficial topics, they were also very personal, as I would later find out, for both of us.

How had this happened? As we talked, I found myself subconsciously drawn into her world, the world of a teenage girl who was trying to make sense of her life, a life pierced by hurt. And, oddly once in a while I also found myself imagining what I might do if I were in her place. Anique offered me a small window into her life, but one that certainly pushed me to see beyond my own experience. And I knew that her story was representative too, unfortunately, of so many young females who lived through similar horrendous experiences and yet came to school, my school, everyday.

When Anique would smile at the end one of our conversations I knew we were done. Each conversation was essentially unresolved, just a part of a larger arc of an ongoing dialogue with no action plan or easy solutions.

Anique was suspended for three days shortly after Thanksgiving but was not suspended again and was never expelled. However, she left the school at the end of that school year and did not register after the summer break. I worried about Anique for a long time and I think I ended up sort of in the same place that Serge Daigneault had been in during that one phone call - genuinely concerned over her well-being.

Story One Continued: Anique Four Years Later

Four years after she left the school, Anique phoned me at work. I had by then moved to a different province with my family and was principal of another school. Anique happened to be attending university in the same city. She had heard where I worked from someone and had decided to call me up for a chat, and we arranged to catch up over a cup of coffee. She was then a 19-year old young woman, a high school graduate and second-year university student.

Over the next two years, Anique came to visit me at my school in my new principal's office and we would talk – mostly about her father, her brothers, and her career aspirations. I learned that after withdrawing from the school that she had left the Wilsons' home and finished high school by living with friends' families and working at part-time jobs. As we reconnected, I was amazed by the resolve of this young woman. I told her she had certainly made an impact on my life in terms of my understanding of the thoughtfulness and resiliency of a teenage girl who had had many obstacles to deal with. Two years after we had resumed the coffee chats in my office, I decided to work with Anique and several former students as part of a research project that explored relational ethics between principals and students. I gave Anique a copy of my story of her and asked her to write down what she thought about her experiences of our relationship. Below is what Anique wrote.

Story Two: In Anique's Words at Age 21

I had a lot of issues that year when I came to the school. I wanted to leave the moment I set foot on the property. I wanted to scream when I saw the cliques of girls moving so tightly down the halls together, arm in arm like they were all best friends. I trusted no one, hated everyone, and spent my time planning ways to get out of there. My home life had fallen apart, my school life was no better, and I just wanted to get away from the Wilsons and everyone else who tried to order me around.

I would pass by the receptionist guarding the front doors of the school with her finger on the intercom button ready to report people leaving campus. While passing by her area I would also have to pass by your office. I would peek through your open door and could see you sitting at your desk. Most days I ate my lunch at the back table in the cafeteria, planning which way I would make a run for it if I ever got the chance to just leave. I actually tried to sneak out with a casual-looking walk one time only to confront a teacher who had just pulled up in her car outside so I made a bee-line back into the only open door and ended up in the hallway in front of the principal's office, your office. And, there you were at your desk and you seemed like you were expecting someone outside your office door, because you looked up, smiled and said, "Hi."

I sat down and I remember the chair you had for visitors was kind of uncomfortable and squeaked a little bit. We began talking about something and from then on I would stop by periodically, pretty regularly, actually, to talk with you. I do not really know how it all began, but I started to trust you and some of your opinions. You gradually became someone I could talk to about issues in my life, but I do not know how that happened. It was not like you suddenly stopped being the principal. I always felt you were completely the authority figure, you know the person who runs the school who is a little scary, a little bit scary at least. But, at the same time you seemed to just listen and just sit there like you wanted to know what I was thinking and how I was doing.

I remember the times when you were on the phone, dealing with the Wilsons and how as I listened it felt like you were there to keep me shielded from some of their craziness. You were honest with them but would not give them every detail about what

had happened. I think that for once in my life there was actually someone who listened to me when I spoke, believed me and could hold my story safe.

As for other relationships I had with teachers and my other school principals, I never really related much to any of those other people. You did not really see many students, even the good ones, in much contact with them. I never felt like I was ever really visible to my teachers and I never got to the point where I would say I trusted one even though I knew some of them were nice people.

I would trust you. I just remember sitting in your office and I knew you were the principal but you were also somebody I could talk to and somebody who trusted me as well. It was more than just a plain teacher and student relationship. Our relationship meant a lot to me at that time. I liked how you would just believe me and then tell some story of something that had happened to you a long time ago or someone else that you knew. You would find ways to make me smile and we would just sort of sit there really puzzled about why people behave like such jerks to kids. So that was quite important and I took that, I valued that, and it meant a lot to me. Since then, I think I have become much stronger than the people who hurt me, and I am a lot smarter about keeping myself from getting mixed up with their issues. I think that started happening, now that I think about it in those conversations.

You let me come to you. You never said, “Well, we had better keep meeting about this, you know, this is serious stuff.” And you never seemed to need to know when I would swing by next but you made it seem like I was welcome. You never pushed for anything. I remember people making “responsibility contracts” and things like “action plans” out for me in middle school, but you never really talked about what was wrong with me. That feeling was kind of weird, having someone believe you, but after a while it was something that I appreciated. And I think you did not have such an easy life either and that was why you probably got what I was saying better than the “counselors” I was supposed to go see. Your office was one of the only places where I felt safe.

The relationship that we had was something that I appreciated because it seemed just, well, like I could breathe when we were having a conversation, like I could relax and know that there would be something to talk about. Every time I dropped in and you could see me and you would just begin with, “How are you doing, Anique?” “What are we talking about today?” I knew my day would be a little bit better. The relationship that we had as a student and principal was really surprising to me. I never expected to be on good terms with a principal, for one thing, and what ended up happening was I sort of looked forward to our chats. I relied on them to feel okay. I could not explain it, the way it was just so constant and calm. It certainly made me happy. And it made a lot of sense that this was how adults could treat me if they took the time to know me.

Finding a Purpose in Our Stories

Issues related to personal relationships, and our values and beliefs take on greater meaning as they are presented in stories of practice (Danzig, 1997). Stories allow us to refocus the ethics and experience of the teaching professions on the nature and significance of relationship. Our stories, in this instance Anique’s and mine, underscore the notion that relationships are the

location for ethical action (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). Necessarily, human flourishing is enhanced by healthy and ethical relationships (Bergum & Dossetor). Even the much-deserved focus on teacher-student relationships can potentially obscure the emphasis on the possible benefits of direct principal-student interactions. The interconnectedness of the narrative and the memories of the experience suggest that professional experience cannot be captured simply through empirical approaches to understand the complex web of relationships that exist in schools. The two narratives exploring this principal-student relationship form a story that can guide us in thinking about the principal-student relationship more intently (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Our profession is not served well by the banality of the mantra that “it is all about relationships” without the concomitant acknowledgement that relationships are powerful, which means they can also be powerfully wrong (Fullan, 2001). While some relationships are linear, many are dynamic, reciprocal and therefore highly unpredictable. And, clearly, students’ lived experiences are interwoven with the experiences of the adults they encounter in school (Boström, 2006). Increasingly, we find that principals are being encouraged to get out of their offices and “walk the halls” of the school to initiate and sustain dialogic relationships not only with staff but also with students (Ryan, 2002, p. 129). This is critically important for those who lead schools because relationships that are rooted in an ethic of receptivity and responsiveness refocus us as we regard people as interdependent moral agents and pay attention to the quality of the commitments between them (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005; Goodlad, 1990; Noddings, 1992).

Too often principals look for definitive statements or search for tools for their toolkits that might enable them to be more effective as ethical leaders. And, just as often, they find solutions that offer up prescriptions that are devoid of the very life and the substrate of the ethical work of what it means to teach and lead. While there might be some insight gained from clinical analyses of ethics, it seems that the stories of teachers and principals, corroborated with those of the students to whom they attend, successfully illuminate the reality of personal human experiences and highlight the importance of relationships in the teaching professions (Strike, Haller & Soltis, 2005). Principals’ stories also remind us that educational leadership is more about character than it is about technique. Effective school leadership should be focused on developing the relationships that support student and teacher learning rather than narrowly concentrating on technocratic approaches to managing things (Pink, 2004; Wolcott, 2003).

Though single decisions made by characters in a setting can always be argued with, after all, maybe a principal should not say yes to an estranged father’s offer to send baby pictures to him, ethical leadership practices in schools are best judged by the shapes of the lives we see our students fashioning. Rather than producing conclusions of certainty about how principals ought to act, narrative inquiry opens up the possibilities of the kind of relationships principals and students experience (Boström, 2006).

Concluding Comments

The stories of the lived experience of the principal-student relationship, and their meanings, have the potential to sensitize school administrators to the nature of the relationship and the ebb and flow experience of relating with students. Ontological considerations are concerned with how we are as beings together in the principal-student relationship, that is, how we are with another

person. Such considerations reach past theories of relationship and become known and understood only through recollections of shared experiences.

There is a need to better understand the experiences of principals through their stories because while it might be true that the telling of our stories can be cathartic and liberating, it can also be a powerful research tool. As Connelly and Clandinin (1999) noted as they listened to administrators' stories, principals' narratives can be more than the embodiment of the institutional story. The stories told by principals can provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. And, perhaps most importantly, they remind us to remember that principals are also committed to teaching and learning to improve the human condition (Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

If principals are to take seriously the challenge of creating schools where students experience an individual and collective sense of belonging, they cannot lose sight of the delicate and intimate dimensions of human belonging (Beck & Foster, 1999). While it is true that people are individuals who need to be understood as such, clearly they are in relation and social context when at school and, thus, they cannot be fully understood only as individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). A narrative inquiry approach that focuses on principal-student relationships opens up the possibilities to better understand schools as a coherent set of relationships and how those relationships shape both those who attend and those who work in schools.

References

- Aranda, S., & Street, A. (2001). From individual to group: Use of narratives in participatory research process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 33, 791-797.
- Beck, L. G., & Foster, W. (1999). Administration and community: Considering challenges, exploring possibilities. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration* (2nd ed., pp. 337-358). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bennett, J. B. (1997). The academy, individualism, and the common good. *Liberal Education*, 83(4), 16-24.
- Bennett, J. B. (2003). *Academic life: Hospitality, ethics and spirituality*. Williston, VT: Anker Publishing.
- Bergin, C. A., & Bergin, D. A. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(2), 141-170.
- Bergum, V. & Dossetor, J. (2005). *Relational ethics: The full meaning of respect*. Hagerstown, MD: University Publishing Group.
- Bondy, E. & Ross, D. D. (2008). The teacher as warm demander. *Educational Leadership*, 66(1), 54-58.
- Boström, A. (2006). *Sharing lived experiences: How upper secondary school teachers and students use narratives to make chemistry more meaningful*. Stockholm, SW: Stockholm Institute of Education Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. (1986). *Writing culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (Eds.) (1999). *Shaping a professional identity: Stories of educational practice*. London, ON: The Althouse Press.
- Danzig, A. B. (1997). Leadership stories: What novices learn by crafting the stories of experienced school administrators. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 35(2), 122-137.
- Freire, P. (2003). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans., 30th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.

- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change: Being effective in complex times*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1990). The occupation of teaching in schools. In J. Goodlad, R. Soder & K. Sirontik (Eds.), *The moral dimensions of teaching* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hall, J. R. (1999). *Cultures of inquiry: From epistemological to discourse in sociohistorical research*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Haller, E. J. & Kleine, P. F. (2001). *Using educational research: A school administrator's guide*. New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Hartrick Doane, G.A. (2002). Beyond behavioral skills to human involved processes: Relational nursing practice and interpretive pedagogy. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 41(9), 400-404.
- Heck, R. & Hallinger, P. (1999) Conceptual models, methodology, and methods for studying school leadership. In J. Murphy & K. Seashore Louis (Eds.) *The Handbook of Research on Educational Administration* (2nd ed., pp. 141-162). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Johnson, K. E. & Golombek, P. R. (2002). Inquiry into experience: Teachers' personal and professional growth. In K. Johnson & P. Golombek (Eds.), *Teachers' narrative inquiry as professional development* (pp. 1-14). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Leithwood, K. & Jantzi, D. (1999). The relative effects of principal and teacher sources of leadership on student engagement with school. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35(5), 679-706.
- Leithwood, K. & Riehl, C. (2003). *What do we know about successful school leadership?* Philadelphia, PA: Laboratory for Student Success, Temple University.
- McEwan, E. (2002). *7 steps to effective instructional leadership* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: CA: Corwin Press.
- Mischler, E. G. (1999). *Storyline: Craftartists' narratives of identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Montero, M. K. & Washington, R. D. (2011). Narrative approaches: Exploring the phenomenon and/or method. In N. Duke & M. Mallette (Eds.), *Literary research methodologies* (2nd ed., pp. 331-352). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring, a feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Noddings, N. (1992) *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*, New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach. Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Pink, D. (2004). *Best practice: A technocrats dream*. Retrieved from http://www.icponline.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=50
- Plano-Clark, V. L. & Creswell, J. W. (2010). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide*. Toronto, ON: Pearson.
- Purpel, D. E., & McLaurin, W. M. (2004). *Reflections on the moral and spiritual crisis in education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Ryan, J. (2002). Inclusive leadership for ethnically diverse schools: Initiating and sustaining dialogue. In H. Fennel (Ed.), *The role of the principal in Canada* (pp.119-141). Calgary, AB: Detselig.
- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stipek, D. (2006) Relationships matter. *Educational Leadership*, 64(1), 46-49.
- Strike, K. A., Haller, E. J. & Soltis, J. F. (2005). *The ethics of school administration* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: SUNY Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Webster, L. & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Witherell, C. & Noddings, N. (1991). *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Wolcott, H.F. (2003). *Teachers vs. technocrats* (Updated edition). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.