WHO WAS THIS WOMAN:
A NARRATIVE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE DAUGHTER OF A PIONEER WHO BECAME A TEACHER

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Brenda Marion Arnold, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Curriculum & Instruction, has presented a thesis titled, *Who was This Woman: A Narrative of the Lived Experiences of the Daughter of a Pioneer Who Became a Teacher*, in an oral examination held on October 22, 2014. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

This thesis is a narrative inquiry of my mother’s lived experiences before she became a teacher in a one-room school house in 1930s Saskatchewan. There have been numerous memoirs written by teachers of rural schools. After reading a wide assortment of these memoirs I noticed that they were mostly of classroom experiences. There is a dearth of information about the lived experiences of these teachers, many of whom were women, prior to their actual classroom teaching. With my mother as a co-inquirer, we narratively explored her lived experiences in her journey into the story of becoming a teacher.

Narrative research lends itself to this type of study: the telling of a particular aspect of my mother’s story, mostly in her words. The thesis became highly intertextual as the participant, my mother, and the researcher read and studied teacher memoirs, local histories, histories and narrative artifacts together, using these to co-create this narrative inquiry. Semi-structured and structured interviews were used to collect data.

I drew on feminist theory to re-read, and to re-know my mother’s familiar stories. Together we read Gloria Mehlman’s (2008) memoir *Gifted to Learn* which served as a counterpoint to my mother’s story. Although not an exact parallel to my mother’s story, our shared reading elevated our narrative inquiry by providing a contrast between the two women educators’ experiences and creating an opportunity for rich conversations between my mother and me during her last days. This narrative inquiry can be used to satisfy the breach in stories about this particular era of the history of educators.
Acknowledgements

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Thanks to my family for putting up with me through this journey. Thanks also, to my critical friends, you know who you are, and I appreciate your input and support.

I acknowledge the financial support from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family. You make me complete. I love you.

I have few regrets in life. One is that Mom, my co-researcher, was not able to read the final paper copy of this thesis. I know, however, in my heart that you have read every word as I could feel your spirit guide me each day as I worked.

This thesis is dedicated to you, Mom and Dad, for making me the person I am.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................ i

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. ii

Dedication .......................................................................................................................... iii

List of Figures ................................................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1: Context ..............................................................................................................1
   Our Background ...............................................................................................................2
   My Background ..............................................................................................................4
   Mom’s Background ......................................................................................................4
   Mother, the Subject ......................................................................................................5
   Rationale for Study ......................................................................................................6
   Research Question ......................................................................................................6
   Narrative Approach .....................................................................................................7
   Theoretical Perspective ...............................................................................................8
   Studying an Elderly Relative ......................................................................................8

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ..................................................................................10
   Introduction ..................................................................................................................10
   History of Women Teachers in Saskatchewan ..........................................................11
   The Female Lived Experience in the Classroom ......................................................13
   Authority and/or Power in the Classroom .................................................................13
   Authority or Power Related to Education .................................................................14
   The One-room School: Rosy and Uncomplicated? .....................................................15
   Teacher Memoirs of the One-room School Era .........................................................18
   Lack Loss Loneliness .................................................................................................20
   Other Teacher Memoirs .............................................................................................22
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Days</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Move</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe It Was Because Dad Sold the Cows</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Was This Teacher?</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If You’re Going to Teach, You Have to Learn</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom, My Mentor</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Don’t Want to Live to be This Old</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Reflection</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Narrative Inquiry</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Interpretation</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices: Appendix A: Certificate of Promotion</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Ethics Approval</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: The Cudmore family farm circa 1960 .................................................................2

Figure 2: Sample of Mom’s edits of data..........................................................................56

Figure 3: Harry Nisbett breaking the sod..........................................................................62

Figure 4: Application of Harry Nisbett for Entry .............................................................63

Figure 5: Earliest photo of Mom.......................................................................................67

Figure 6: Doreen (Age 16) ................................................................................................71

Figure 7: Barney, the horse...............................................................................................88

Figure 8: Mom, Grade XII ...............................................................................................97

Figure 9: Oregon School .................................................................................................106

Figure 10: Richard’s Chickadee picture ..........................................................................113

Figure 11: The Local News.............................................................................................116

Figure 12: Mom’s observations of the lack of student discipline training .....................118

Figure 13: Maple Slope school .......................................................................................124

Figure 14: Doreen’s last teaching position in a one-room country school ....................124

Figure 15: Certificate of Promotion, 1940.................................................................143
History tells me it was early fall. I only remember a night with millions of stars poking through the ink black blanket of the sky. Mom was excited – so excited that she had us all lying on our backs on the shed roof waiting and watching for Sputnik to arc over our little farm in the middle of nowhere. While we waited she showed us the constellations, pointing to this star as a guide to finding that formation. I don’t remember seeing Sputnik. I’m sure it was just another star to me. I do, however, vividly recall the experience, that feeling of smallness up on the roof with my family and, of course, Mom giving us that opportunity to learn. She was the ultimate educator.

Chapter 1: Context

I have been immersed in the history and culture of teaching Kindergarten to Grade 12 in the province of Saskatchewan my entire life. For 36 years I taught at all grade levels, mostly in rural Saskatchewan. My family is one of educators. Our experiences are varied but all are related to teaching and the field of education. Due to my positioning in my family I have a ‘natural’ interest in our experiences as educators, and in the experiences that led us to our positions as educators. Throughout my life women in roles as diverse as: siblings, teachers, Sunday School teachers, professors, camp counselors, our minister, my doctor, critical friends and friends have had a great influence on me. All of these women, including my Mother, have influenced not only my philosophy on life and living, but most certainly, my teaching. Consequently, my research interests focus on the lived experiences of women teachers, specifically those of my mother. In order to better understand the study, it is important to understand the context of the study and the participants, my mother and me.
Our Background

Mine was a very small, very typical farm home situated on the prairies in the 1950’s. Even the farm yard was small by today’s standards. There was the house (which Mom worked diligently to separate from the barn yard with a row of caragana trees and painted rocks), a ‘shop’ (where Dad kept machinery and attempted to fix equipment), a chicken house, a row of small wooden grain bins and an old hip-roofed barn that seemed huge when I was small. This could have been my entire world, except for my mother. She made my world big because of who she was – the quintessential educator.

The house was small; hence, our kitchen was very small. When I return to the house that I grew up in, and stand in the middle of the kitchen, I am amazed that our family of six plus my Grandfather all lived in that space. There was an eating area, a table nestled into a built-in bench along the wall under the window, with chairs on one side, a propane stove and a fridge, a very few feet of counter and a kitchen sink without running water. This room will be forever imprinted in my mind because that is where I spent the most time with my mother, not my mother the homemaker, but my mother the teacher. As a young child I do not remember baking with my mother; I do not remember

Figure 1: The Cudmore family farm circa 1960.
doing a craft or being read to by my mother. I am sure that these things happened but I do not recall them.

Mom worked off the farm in a time when very few women worked out of the home. It was of necessity as farming was not paying well in the 1950’s. There was opportunity for her to teach and so she did. I stayed home with Dad and Grandpa; my older siblings travelled to the nearby one-room school with Mom. It was a good system. I knew nothing different. My days were spent mostly with my Dad shadowing whatever he did - doing field work, riding the tractor, hauling bales, going for repairs, doing chores in the barn or off visiting neighbours. I kept mice in my pockets as pets. I chased rabbits. Sometimes Dad would catch one and I would keep it for a bit, always naming each new pet. I remember being only happy as a child. As much as I loved ‘farming’ with Dad, I loved ‘teaching’ with Mom even more.

Back to the kitchen. Of course, like many other homes of the time and place, the kitchen served as the hub, with meals being only a small part of the activity. Because Grandpa lived with us he would be in the house in the morning when I awakened and he would watch me until Dad came in from chores. This was important because I needed to be able to sleep in as I was allowed to stay up and ‘work’ with Mom at the kitchen table as she did all the things that teachers do in order to be prepared for the next day. As I reflect on these evenings I cannot remember what the rest of my family was doing. We had no television until 1958. Perhaps they went to bed while Mom and I stayed up and ‘worked’. I don’t recall. I can still smell the aroma of the hectograph gel tray and see the hand peeled copies drying on the kitchen table. I can clearly see Mom correcting with perfect red checks and x’s. She would give me some ‘papers’ and would instruct me in
the marking, making sure that the correcting was tidy and not interfering with the
students’ answers! I ‘wrote, marked, read’ and did teacher things. She modeled and I
shadowed. What I came to realize was that I would be a teacher, just like my mother, and
I did.

My Background

I was born in Regina and raised, until I was nearly ten, on the farm near Dummer,
Saskatchewan with my brother and two sisters. We then moved to Regina where I grew
up and finished my education. I became a teacher and I taught children for 36 years.
When asked what I taught, I never replied ‘school’. I always replied ‘children’. I loved
it. My teaching experience, although certainly not unique, has been very different from
most of my peers. I taught for ten years in urban schools, including six months in
Ottawa, six years in a one-room school, and the remainder in rural Saskatchewan, many
years in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school in my hometown of Avonlea.

Upon superannuation (note I do not use the word retirement as it implies a finality
that I was not ready to deal with) I began my studies in the Master of Education program
at the University of Regina. Many, including several family members, questioned my
sanity at this decision at that point in my life. I felt, however, that the timing was perfect
as I now had the time to devote to this type of study and learning. It was something that I
had always wanted to do. I love learning.

Mom’s Background

My mother was born in a tiny house on the prairie near the beginning of the last
century. She was born three miles from the farm on which she raised her family – three
miles from the kitchen that she and I ‘worked’ in. She grew up in an era of Canadian
history that created a unique generation of people; people who would be forever affected
by the ramifications of the Great Depression. This period of prairie history and its effects
on its survivors is documented, both in the history books and through oral narrative. The
consequences of living in this era, documented historically or not, would have life-long
effects on my mother.

This child of the prairie would become the young woman who would begin her
teaching career, after a mere ten months of training, very close to where she grew up,
 Facing the challenges that many teachers of that time did. This woman would teach
children, parent and continue her formal education almost until she retired from the
profession. This woman would teach and learn until the day she died.

Mother, the Subject

At the beginning of this narrative study my mother was 90 years old with a frail
body and a vibrant mind. She was very capable of accepting the role of ‘co-researcher’
and was most excited to be an active participant in her daughter’s research. The centre of
this thesis is the interviews with my mother about her life. The very process of my data
collecting, the editing and the critical conversations consumed her. Her eyes sparkled,
sometimes with excitement, sometimes with anger, and sometimes with laughter as
recollections and stories unfolded. She found the process both fascinating and
challenging.

For most of the study Mom lived a five minute walk away in the personal care
home in Avonlea and I could visit her every day. She died in May, 2011. Fortunately,
not before I had collected my data, and not before she was able to proofread and edit the
data, and the transcripts of the data; unfortunately, before she was able to read the
finished thesis, my ‘book’ as she called it. She took her role very seriously and proved to be a worthy co-researcher.

**Rationale for Study**

My mother was born, educated, taught, and lived in a period of history that has always fascinated me. Her early education, post-secondary training, and then her subsequent career as an educator teaching for many years in one-room schools, served to further pique my interests. However, I discovered in my research that there was a void in the texts of teachers, mostly women, teaching in this time period. Although there are numerous references to the teaching experiences of this era, there is little reference to the lived experiences that brought these teachers to their teaching positions. My study will attempt to address this gap.

**Research Question**

This narrative study will specifically tell the story of the lived experiences of my mother the person, leading to my mother the educator, mostly in the era of the one-room country school. The centre of this thesis is the interviews with my mother specifically about this period in her life. There are many memoirs written about teaching in this era. Few, however, spoke of the lived experiences that brought these, mostly young women teachers, to their positions. This time period will begin with my mother’s birth in 1919 and relates her experiences as a child, as a student and as a teacher, up to and including her initial teaching experiences in one-room schools, culminating with her last experience of this kind in 1958. The two - the person and the educator - cannot be separated. My experiences, although often eerily parallel to my mother’s, will be incidental, serving as a counter-point, a foil to illuminate key points in my findings. This is her story, not mine.
Narrative Approach

Who was this woman, this quintessential educator? What was her place in the history of education here in Saskatchewan? Since the study is my interpretation of the experiences of the participants, mostly my mother’s and incidentally mine, I will draw on narrative inquiry to make meaning of my mother’s lived experiences. After all, it is her story.

My mother’s story is not unique. It is one of many from that time but it is uniquely her story. Britzman (1991) says:

[the] retelling of another’s story is always a partial telling, bound not only by one’s perspective but also by the exigencies of what can and cannot be told. The narratives of lived experiences – the story, or what is told, and the discourse, or what it is that structures how a story is told – are always selective, partial, and in tension. (p. 15)

Will the entire story be told? Dickson (2003) answers this question pointing out that “…we may resist the definitive telling [of life story], as it may always seem insufficient or incomplete, even to ourselves” (p. 191).

There will be omissions, there will be errors but I will attempt to narrate her story as it was told to me.

Laurel Richardson (1994) says that “writing is not simply a ‘true’ representation of an objective ‘reality’; instead, language creates a particular view of reality” (p. 116), adding that “qualitative research must be read and good life history research demands good writing” (p. 156). When constructing narratives, Schacklock further adds that it is important to consider “whose voices will be heard and represented in the text” (as cited in
Somekh and Lewin, (2005) p.159). I will attempt to represent the voice of my co-inquirer authentically. The writing style of the study will be less formal and more in keeping with the cadence of the data, the story talk.

The legacy of the one-room school house will serve as a trope; a backdrop for the participant’s lived experiences. The experience of being educated in a one-room school and then teaching in that same educational setting became a part of this study. Again, this period in history, where a child became educated in a setting with its many unique characteristics, very close to his or her home, is not a story unique to my mother. But because this is her story, and the one-room school was an integral part of her story, it becomes an integral part of this study and will be addressed in Chapter 2.

**Theoretical Perspective**

This is a study by a woman, of a woman, in a time when women held many teaching positions in primary classrooms, especially in rural classrooms. As such, the narrative research was informed by feminist theory (Brooks, 2007). Walker argues that feminist theory is “more than a matter of method, and raises philosophical issues of ontology (one’s world view and how this shapes what can be known about the world and indeed what it means to be a full human being) and epistemology (what counts as knowledge and ways of knowing)” (as cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 66). This perspective provides the lens needed for the participant to not just tell her story, allowing the researcher to create the narrative, but also created the context allowing for an understanding of this woman and her lived experiences.
**Studying an Elderly Relative**

There are limitations to a study of this kind, other than the obvious one, the age of the participant. Researching the experiences of the elderly requires a unique process, one that allows for reflection without judgment (Dickson, 2003). Another limitation in this study is the relationship of participant and researcher. I will be diligent in representing the narrative as truthfully as possible, regardless of relationship, because “[the] qualitative researcher’s task is to render an account of participants’ worldviews as honestly and fully as possible” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 65). There will be a personal influence within the narrative as the narrative is of the lived experiences of my mother.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

First, I will review the feminist theories which inform the theoretical framework of the study. Then, I will summarize the major themes in the teacher memoirs I draw upon to analyze my mother’s biography. In order to situate myself in this scholarly milieu I read relevant theoretical literature and nearly 50 teacher memoirs. The teacher memoirs had direct bearing on the study as they affirmed my finding that, although the memoirists related their stories as teachers, their stories were, for the most part, only reflective of the teaching experience, and told little of the preceding life experiences leading to the teaching experiences. Historical literature illuminated the time in history relevant to the participant’s experiences, including the era of the one-room school. Readings of more contemporary memoirists created a backdrop for this type of study. Readings in self-study, including those related to feminist theory, became a necessary part of this type of research as well.

Feminist theory has been the main influence in my life, as well as life of the subject/co-participant of this study. Feminism informed the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. It is through this lens that data was collected and analyzed. Walker states that “…feminist research aspires to be for women as much as it is about women” (Walker as cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 66). Education is viewed as a feminist practice by my mother - a practice that is influenced by place, time, economics, family order and familial and societal expectations. Feminist theory is a way of thinking, lenses through which to view all facets of education: teaching, learning, students, teachers, peers, methods of instruction, to name but a few. Finally, I address the literature relevant
to narrative inquiry as one method of qualitative research, including subjectivity, within the method. This chapter will address the relevance of these readings to this narrative study.

**History of Women Teachers in Saskatchewan**

The historical component of this study is reflective of female educators and education in rural Saskatchewan, Kindergarten to Grade 12, and education from the time just before the Great Depression in the last century to the present. Historically, in Saskatchewan, women made their way from the home into the workplace. In *A History of Education in Saskatchewan* (Noonan, Hallman & Scharf, 2006) Dianne Hallman offers explanation and rationale for this process.

In the first half of the last century in Saskatchewan most teachers were “typically young white women who worked for a few years after a very brief period of formal training” (Hallman, 2006, p. 158). Hallman creates a link between what women were prior to the time when education moved from the home into the community and into the school setting:

The belief that women are especially suited to teach young children is linked to the notion that teaching is an extension of motherwork and, in large measure, is rooted in women’s actual and historical circumstances. Historian Alison Prentice points out that the feminization of teaching does not mean that women suddenly took up work that they had not done before. Rather, they moved into *public* school teaching, at a time when elementary education itself was gradually moving out of the household and into the ever growing public institutions that would eventually almost monopolize the name of ‘schools’. Prior to the development of
state-supported education, women had engaged in teaching through their work as mother, Sunday school teachers, private tutors, and self-employed teachers in a variety of private venture schools. Often this work is overlooked in conventional histories of teaching. (p. 150)

This perspective on the transition from educating in the home, domestic work, to teaching within formal structure in a public space by women is historically important; this transition depicts the importance of women in the evolution of formal education.

This shift in focus created a natural workplace for women. Does feminist pedagogy encompass the idea that we, as women, are by nature nurturers and therefore, able to teach in a different and perhaps, more effective manner (Corey, 2005)?

Hutchinson (2009) argues:

Women belong in the domestic sphere while men belong in the public sphere, the rationale being that women are better suited to domestic roles and are too tender for the hardscrabble existence of public life. This same tenderness coupled with their biological imperative to bear children has led many to presume that women are by nature nurturers. (p. 358)

This evolution from the home to the school involved mostly women. Supposedly, evolution is a modernistic idea denoting the arc of progress.

This initial foray into the classroom by women raises discussion of gender in education and in society. hooks (2000), in her book Feminism is for Everybody, discusses the idea that feminism, be it in the classroom or in society at large is not about “being anti-male” (p. 8). Feminism is based in common sense and addresses wisdom based on experience (hooks, 2009). She attempts to show that commitment to “equality,
mutual respect and justice” (p. 80), is desirable in not just the classroom but in society itself. While much of hooks’ discussion is focused on Black women as educators, it also speaks to all women in education and of our roles in the profession.

**The Female Lived Experience in the Classroom**

Are we, because we are women, better suited to the classroom (Gilbert, 1999)? Are women better able to transfer lived experiences onto the teaching stage or do we use our lived experiences to create the stage for learning? Middlecamp (2006) states, “Feminist pedagogy strives to make classrooms more hospitable to women by drawing on examples from their lives, acknowledging the broad range of their accomplishments, and treating their life experiences as normal” (p. 525). It is difficult to know if Middlecamp is referring to the act of teaching from a feminist approach or to the teacher creating a classroom where women will feel safe – not physically, of course, but safe in their identities as female teachers and students. The point I take from Middlecamp is that in the classroom there is a learning climate that is created that allows the students and the teachers to be participants, bringing their accomplishments and life experiences into their realm of learning and teaching, recognizing their lived experiences. Many times and in various ways my mother credited her lived experiences for her perceived success in her profession. Certain emancipator feminist theorists view voice and story as being important (Weedon, 2004, Welch, 2004); linking Mom’s voice and story to narrative inquiry seemed congruent with that idea for me.

**Authority and/or Power in the Classroom**

There cannot be discussion of teaching, of educating, without reference to power. In the classroom power is often viewed as authority. According to Counts “the power that
teachers exercise in the schools can be no greater than the power they wield in society” (Counts as cited in Flinders and Thornton, 1998, p. 46). Growing up in our home my mother was the authority; she made most of the decisions from family issues to finances. My dad decided which crop to seed but Mom decided where the money earned from it would be spent. From my Mom’s narratives I know that my mother believed that in her classroom she was the authority. She operated in the classroom the same way that she operated in our home – her way and with authority.

**Authority or Power Related to Education**

What then is the difference between authority and power, related to education? Welch (2004), in her discussion of feminist pedagogy, adds “three prohibitions to teachers in their relations with students: don’t dominate, don’t humiliate and don’t indoctrinate” (p. 4). These ‘prohibitions’, within the context of feminist pedagogy, lead into the discussion of teacher/student relationships and the issue of power in the classroom. Teachers have power and teachers are powerful. My mother, however, certainly felt that she had little power over her life before she became a teacher, with the feeling that most decisions were out of her hands. She referred to power while in the classroom, not so much as dictatorial but more as a means of survival.

Mom truly believed that if she held the power in her classroom that her students would learn more, if not better. During our conversations in this inquiry we had many heated debates over the idea of teacher authority and power. hooks (1998) questions how “we as feminist teachers use power in a way that is not coercive, dominating” and answers that “we can use power in ways that diminish or in ways that enrich and it is this choice that should distinguish feminist pedagogy from ways of teaching that reinforce
domination” (p. 180). Mom’s definition of power proves to be an iteration related to both Middlecamp’s and hook’s points.

The previous readings were critical to the understanding of my subsequent readings which were all those of women teachers, both historical and contemporary. Feminist understanding helped me to make sense of all readings.

**The One-room School: Rosy and Uncomplicated?**

The one-room school is a central symbol in the readings of educators in the era of this study – the time of my mother’s birth (1919) up to the closing of the last one-room school in which she taught, 1958. These were not just schools, buildings in which children were instructed in the curriculum of the day, but they served as social institutions as well.

The one-room school is not just a memory, a recollection, to be a filed and forgotten piece of Saskatchewan’s prairie past. Its place in the history of education has perhaps not garnered proper importance in its effect on the evolution of education. Charyk (1968) argues that if “we as Canadians are to acknowledge ourselves as a nation we cannot ignore the part that the one-room school had in shaping this destiny” (p. 3). These unique educational settings, one-room school houses, are often depicted with great affection - perhaps a symbol of the rosy, uncomplicated past, which may or may not have actually existed or perhaps valorized out of proportion, even romanticized.

Teachers, students and historians have written as many stories and memoirs of this era in the history of education in Saskatchewan as there are abandoned one-room schools on the prairies. Nellie McClung, the late Canadian writer and educator
“envisaged the important role that one-room schools were to play in the development of
the country:

Weather-beaten and gray it stands,
A tiny dot on the harvest lands.
Not very much to see!
Porch at the end where the gophers play;
Smelling of crumbs on a summer day.
Row of windows, two or three
Inside walls of smoky gray
Hung with torn and crooked maps.
A broken blind that taps and taps.
‘Not an attractive spot’, you say?
No! but here in this lowly station,
Slowly is working an ancient law.
And a temple is rising, that we call a nation,
Without the sound of hammer or saw.”
(as cited in Charyk, 1968, p. 2)

The one-room school was the constant in these stories; both physically and
metaphorically. By this I mean its creation as well as its structure, design and purpose.
In western Canada, especially on the prairies, these institutions of learning emerged soon
after homesteaders first took care of the rudiment needs of home. Charyk (1968) in The
Little White Schoolhouse documents this evolution from its beginnings through to its
realization, as the school being the hub of every rural community. He explains some of
the conditions to be met for the establishment of each new school district:
The district could not exceed five miles in length or breadth exclusive of road allowances. It had to include at least four persons who actually resided therein and who, on the formation of the district, would be liable to assessment of taxes for school purposes…and was to contain at least eight children not younger than five nor older than sixteen years. (p. 3)

As Mom and I discussed Charyk’s observations of the beginnings of these first schools she commented that “five miles seems short now but back then each of our schools may as well have been on the moon.” They were for the most part built to suit the residents and because of this they became not only entities unto themselves but were situated geographically in isolation, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

Mom and I read many descriptions of one-room schools but in the end I think her own words, although perhaps not as eloquently written as many that we read, portray for me Mom’s vision of where she spent a lot of her time, both as a student and as a teacher. She recalled:

The children were usually grouped by grades, seated in rows, often in desks that were screwed onto slats, some were single and others double; the rows always straight! There was the requisite stove, cared for by the ‘janitor’ (often a senior student), a teacher’s desk, usually blackboards, maybe some shelves, sometimes a map, sometimes a crockery water tank, cloakrooms for coats and lunch pails that were usually lard tins. There was a Union Jack over the front board beside a picture of the Queen. No, it was the King back then. And outside there was another flag, sometimes a swing and sometimes a barn of sorts and of course, an outhouse, maybe two, one for the girls and one for the boys. They weren’t just
schools; we held meetings, elections, dances, sometimes church, the Christmas concert. We used it [the school] for whatever it was needed for.

These tiny structures, with nearby outhouses and barns, dotting the prairie in isolation, served not only to educate the children of pioneers but also provided a place, in spite of their locations and proximity to the families that they served, to gather for fellowship and fun.

**Teacher Memoirs of the One-room School Era**

Long before I ever contemplated writing a thesis about my mother and her experiences, I have always been keenly interested in the memoirs of teachers past who taught in the one-room school house and the experiences that brought them to that position. For the purposes of my research I decided that a ‘teacher memoir’ would be authored by a woman writing of her experiences in the same period of history that my mother lived and taught in, 1920 – 1958, the general era of the one-room school. I selected those that were complementary as well: the authors were mostly prairie born, and all wrote about their experiences in the one-room school house.

In the course of my research, I have read numerous teacher memoirs and amateur histories, all written by female teachers, in order to provide a framework for, and to inform my research. Nearly all that I read were of the period in history that concerns this study. The memoirs varied in format from articles in anthologies to full-length monographs. Many were formally written and documented, some were written as personal reflections reminiscent of diary entries, and some were written as published biographies. These writings were informative as they served to illuminate and to help build a feminist understanding of my mother’s lived experiences. The authors of these
memoirs, all females, all in somewhat similar situations provided a window of words helping to create a backdrop for my mother and me in our co-inquiry.

In reading the memoirs, I realized that none of the works reflected the writers’ formative years; nearly all addressed the writers’ actual teaching experiences, and mainly their classroom experiences. It was because of the absence of those stories that I decided to focus on my Mom’s lived experiences leading up to her classroom experiences. My mother had not ever fully related this part of her life story. She had not voice recorded, and had only incidentally written of any of her lived experiences, both prior to, and of her teaching career.

The similarities among the many memoirs that I read were uncanny. They tell mostly of teaching in this time on the prairies. There were many, many women who filled the role of the one-room schoolhouse teacher; however, interestingly, the one memoir that is still on the Saskatchewan English Language Arts curriculum is Max Braithwaite’s (1977) memoir Why Shoot the Teacher? Perhaps it is because, “The male experience has been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the pattern in women’s voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful templates men have etched in the literature and in our minds” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 9). It would cause one to wonder if it is always the man’s story that is most important. The male point of view dominates. I make this observation as a point of interest as I chose women authors in my research study, yet I never conscientiously thought to incorporate any of these authors into my senior English Language Arts classes when I was teaching. What does this say about how I was constructed? Does it address my personal construction or does it address my educational construction, or both? I don’t recall any
references to discussion of gender of authors when studying curriculum in my teacher training. However, as an English teacher this was not a primary concern. I did, however, conscientiously slant literature choices toward the boys in my classes.

We discussed gender and curriculum on many occasions. Mom’s definitive comment was that she simply taught the curriculum and that she “didn’t have time to think about stuff like that”. ‘Stuff like that’ to Mom being, in my opinion, the philosophical construct of curriculum. The discussion forced me to recall my earlier teaching practices and how they evolved. Like Mom I initially didn’t give gender in curriculum much thought; however, near the end of my career, as I said, I tended to slant curriculum choices toward the males in my classes because it was important to me that they not only learn but enjoy what they were learning.

The titles themselves reflect the fibre of the authors’ existences: *Chalk Dust, Scarce as Hen’s Teeth, Tales Out of School, They Decided to Keep the Teacher, Unshakeable Persistence, Trailblazers of the Chalkboard*. Upon reading, these memoirs dispel notions of romanticism sometimes associated with teaching in that time (Lewis, 1993). To conflate these writings is not to do disservice to the authors’ memories nor to these memoirs as literary-historical artifacts. The themes, the stories, are often very similar to one another depicting life as a teacher during that period in our history (or herstory) as being most often difficult.

**Lack Loss Loneliness**

The most consistent of these themes were useful to me as a researcher in the interpretative understanding of my mother’s experiences. The first theme to be discussed is the experience of deprivation which I call “lack and loss.” What the memoirs reveal as
lacking range from the material to the spiritual: lack of materials; lack of support; lack of salary; lack of money for many things, including food, clothing, school supplies, transportation; lack of power ranging from electrical power to lack of personal power; lack of salary and benefits, to name a few. Jean Grund, one young teacher’s reflection mirrors many of the rest of the memoirists recalling, “I often wonder how we did it – the only resources being our minds and whatever books, etc., that we brought with us” (Saskatchewan Centennial School Tales, 2005, p. 4). Upon reading these stories I, too, began to wonder, ‘indeed, how did they do it’?

Agnes Hunter in With Unshakeable Persistence (McLachlan, 1999) shows that even the quest for basic teaching materials was a challenge. “There were no reference books at my first school. Just chalk, a broom, a ball, and a bat. We did get two large boxes of old books from Ontario…books no longer used, so of little use for reference” (p. 85). When I showed Mom, with the click on the computer, the instant Internet access with its unlimited resources, she clucked her tongue and marveled, “We had nothing really. We managed.” The school ‘marms’ of the Depression Era flew by the ‘seat of the pants’, not to experiment, but to survive.

The theme of loss is intertwined with the theme of lack. There was this sense of not just losing one’s physical place of familiarity, most often the family home, but also of losing one’s sense of confidence while facing the challenges of teaching often in strange and distant locations (Barton, 1993). McDonald (1981) sums up this feeling saying, “I felt lost. Most did. We lost our homes, not that they burnt down, but we were so far away from what we knew. We should have been confident after Normal [School] but I
wasn’t. I simply felt lost” (p. 30). For these new teachers to the profession, this sense of loss, coupled with their struggles for what they lacked, made for challenging experiences.

A final theme emergent in the memoirs, is that of the loneliness of teaching at that time. Teaching has been traditionally viewed as a solitary profession even though the practice usually takes place in a collective setting. We work with others but our work is carried out, most often, in our classrooms, alone with students or simply working alone. Yet in my teaching life, apart from my time in a one room school, I did not ever feel alone; I always felt my colleagues close by. Nevertheless, there are many references to isolation and loneliness from Mom’s era, as well as in contemporary teacher memoirs.

The majority of teachers who went to teach in rural schools left friends and family far behind. McLachlan (1999) adds that for many “they had to start over, putting down roots and establishing new friendships – no easy task in a rural setting…often merely labeled ‘The Teacher’…always under scrutiny…a creature of knowledge from the outside world” (p.159). This reputation, this expectation of teachers’ roles in school and community, created a situation of loneliness for many, for seldom was there more than one teacher in the community (Poelzer, 1990). Mom and I discussed this theme of loneliness, not just in our one-room school settings but also in the rest of our teaching experiences. We agreed that it is a constant hazard of the profession (Pattison, 1991).

**Other Teacher Memoirs**

The reading of many women teachers’ stories written about experiences in the era of the one-room school, subsequently led me to other contemporary teacher memoirs. Personal narratives or life histories are forms of qualitative research, a telling of how things are or were, so that record is made of the experiences. One can learn much from
the experiences and the stories of others as well as gaining insights about the teller.

Bullough (Bullough as cited by Loughran (2007) says, that “storytelling is one way of ‘getting a handle on what we believe, on the models, metaphors and images that underpin action and enable meaning making…through storytelling, personal theories become explicit’” (p.13). Storytelling, personal narrative, has purpose and function. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative theorists using story as research, tell us that

Fenstermacher’s challenge is that “teacher knowledge research is not simply one of showing us that teachers think, believe, or have opinions, but that they know. And, even more important, that they know that they know” (p. 28). These memoirists, both from the one-room school era and the contemporary ones, cannot help but impress, not only with their knowledge but with their honesty, their wisdom and especially their voice(s). We hear and see their experiences, we don’t just read words, a story; we know that ‘they know’ of what they speak.

Interestingly, I decided to read a work classified as fiction during my research because the title resonated with me. I recognize that as soon as something is written down it is fiction. However, this novel proved to offer invaluable advice on the writing of a memoir; consequently, aiding me not only in the reading of memoirs but in taking up my mother’s narratives and my own. Indeed, in the end this narrative of a particular period in Mom’s life may travel into memoir.

Although fiction, Kalpakian’s (2004) instructor in *The Memoir Club* uses the following to assist her students in their memoir writing: “Things to Remember: A memoir is an act not just of preservation but of invention. The memoir is a narrative construct: literary shape that you give to the past. Much is left out, much is subsumed,
much is demanded” (p. 6). My subject, my Mother, will indeed give literary shape to her past. Much will be left out and assumptions will be made but these will not detract from their stories.

Kalpakian’s (2004) instructor also offers these words of advice by explaining that:

…the experience described in the memoir is not fresh. Not raw. The grit of daily life has been expunged, polished, washed away. The memoir has always the advantage of hindsight. It recognizes the significance of people and events. It pulls the past into a pattern. It gives the past shape and meaning that it did not have when it was the present. (p. 56)

Mom’s stories, her reflections may at times ‘wash’ away the grit of her daily life but each story resonates with ‘the grit’ of living.

The tricky thing called memory, which so often stands as a caveat to accuracy (Lewis, 2007) becomes an issue in memoirs as the memoirist writes as exactly as their memory serves. Lewis explains:

Yet, memory for events in narrative is seen as not exact buy somehow shaped through schema. Schema themselves are shaped by experiences, concepts of self, and ideas of typicality” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 83) suggesting a distortion of the actual events and bringing into question the verity of narrative. However, it is that very process, the reworking of narratives through schema that constructs the “verisimilitude” of narratives. Through story, personal narrative, or autobiographical acts we try to “remedy the loss of the past by a more existential and descriptive approach, one that actually allow us to make contact with and participate in the values of the past in the only way that seems possible” (Kerby,
1991, p. 22). It is a retrieval and re-creation of self through story. “When we recollect, it is remembering the past, whether events experiences, stories heard, or things see, but to remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistive picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 22). (p. 25)

My co-inquirer certainly had no difficulty in remembering her stories; retrieval was never difficult. She indeed “relived” her experiences in the telling of them. Lewis goes on to say:

Though the past is often said to no longer exist, it has a rebirth in the present. The past has a temporal order in relation to the present, in “that it has been ‘in its time’ traversed by my life, and carried forward to this moment” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 416). A personal story is a re-creation of the past, beginning from memory. When I tell a story I call up a past, “I reopen time, and carry myself back to a moment in which it still had before it a future horizon now closed, and a horizon of the immediate past” (p. 416) is now remote. Consequently everything in this process “causes me to revert to the field of presence as the primary experience in which time and its dimensions make their appearance unalloyed, with no intervening distance and with absolute self-evidence” (p. 416). Such a story is a representation, a re-presenting; making present what is no longer here. To represent is to bring into one’s presence; to bring before the mind by description or by an act of imagination; to exhibit, show display, or bring before the mind and
eye; to make visible, manifest, or present (Onions, 1969, p. 757; Skeat, 1968, p. 511). (p. 26)

This is a thesis, an educational study of Mom’s experiences as she recalled them. She recreated her past from memory and there was no doubt that things were as she told them, according to her.

Lewis further contends that:
To represent through story is a dimension of our temporal being and is therefore potentially accessible not merely through static representations [but also] by extending or redirecting our awareness in the relevant direction…This process is…a movement through time that very often attempts to reconstruct a more or less coherent story of certain past events…perhaps due more to what we feed into the material than the basic material of recollection itself…The material of recollection is analogous to archaeological finds that still require interpretation for their precise temporal location and sense (Kerby, 1991, pp. 22-23).

Memory is not a problem, nor do the “schema” distort our experience of reality. Narratives enable us to organize and construct unified meaning from a plethora of events, actions, and experiences. The biographer, historian, ethnographer, and the storyteller in all of us do not face a problem doing this. Memory enables me to bring the past forward to the present. In the present “I can sift through the archaeological find,” (Kerby, 1991) “redeem or awaken to life” (Frye, 1957, p. 345) in the “recollection forward” (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 131). (p. 26)
In the telling of her experiences, Mom essentially created an “archaeological find” – we dug away at layers as she retrieved and re-created her ‘self’ from her memory. She, to her best knowledge and memory, brought her ‘past forward to the present’.

Women’s stories are often restoried to make the unsayable sayable. It is in the retelling that the story becomes real. And, of course, Mom gives shape and meaning to her past, meaning that may not have been as clear when it indeed was the present. However, it is important to note that while collecting data Mom called in a former student (five years her junior) to help verify the names of the students in ‘the Grade One row’ in their proper order in her one-room school in 1938. Rossman and Rallis (2003) call this “participation validation – also known as ‘member checks’ [where] you take emerging findings back to the participants for them to elaborate, correct, extend, or argue about...as a method for eliciting further information and with emerging analyses” (p.69). Perhaps, for Mom, this corroboration was necessary for her to trust her memory – it could also be attention to detail. It is certainly an illumination of what kind of detail was valued, and perhaps constructed as knowledge by her. Mom called me later with this edit, double-checking the next day at a session, that I had indeed done it correctly and then politely, but firmly, requested to witness the correction in writing.

Memoirs reflecting politics and maturation during particular historical periods became part of my research. How does one’s positioning in history affect his or her worldview? Alice Kaplan’s (1993) memoir French Lessons manages to wrap, like a gift, her life story in the French language while using English words. She includes, as part of her memoir, a reflection of herself and her and her family’s politics. Kaplan’s lens allows the reader to become a part of that history. The seventies provided her with a backdrop for
her coming of age, a time for self-realization. Her story resonated with me as I, too, ‘grew up’ during that era. I experienced this same need for independence, and opportunity to make decisions for myself. Kaplan explains how the study of language did this for her. “French got me away from my family and taught me how to talk. Made me an adult” (p. 141). For me, university ‘got me away’; it was liberating to say the least. Mom would say that her teacher training, although limited, did the same for her.

The 1930’s created this same independence and coming of age for the one-room school teacher. Mom said that for most there was no choice. Thelma Drinnan (1985) in Chalk Dust writes, “I grew up fast even though I was not much older than my oldest students. There was no other way. I only had me” (p. 88). These very young, mostly female teachers would quickly have to adapt, to learn and to teach, often completely outside their comfort zone, and in doing so morphed into teachers, often working independently, depending on their ingenuity and perseverance to get them by.

Both the 1930’s and the 1970’s were periods of similar social and economic upheaval. For many of the one-room school ‘mams’ the leaving of their families, their very short months of Normal School teacher training and then their dispatch, often to a strange place far from their homes, parallels that of Kaplan’s (1993) immersion in the French language in a foreign country – for many of these young women teachers on the prairies nearly every part of the experience was foreign.

The Journey Toward Teaching

I had no idea what to expect from the variety of memoirs that I read, only that they would be personal reflections of educational experiences. I immersed myself in the authors’ stories. Some of the contemporary reflections were more reflective of the lived
experiences that I was most interested in, the journey from child to student to teacher.

The theme of this journey is best illustrated by Jane Tompkins.

Jane Tompkins (1996) in *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* tracks her personal journey from student to classroom teacher to classroom facilitator demonstrating the path of freedom that worked for her. As an educator, reading the memoirs of educators, I found myself constantly comparing, analyzing and self-reflecting. Tompkins creates a venue for self-reflecting about many aspects of educating. She says:

> To be empowering, discipline must be chosen. At some fundamental level, if you have not chosen it, the skills a discipline may give you are not yours, are not an outgrowth of who you are, but a disposable proficiency…What my teaching has been aiming for is not the empowering discipline itself but the wisdom to know what that might be when it comes along. (p. 160)

Tompkins tugged my co-researcher and me into a discussion of the teacher ‘knowing’ what has been taught or as Mom added, “more important, what has been learned.” Who or what is the determiner of knowledge?

The idea of knowing when our students know, and what or who makes that determination is another common theme in many of these readings, including those of the one-room school teacher. For Tompkins it was a self-realization, for the one-room school teachers it was the superintendent, also known as the school inspector, who made the determination.

Muriel Knox (2005), writing in *Saskatchewan Centennial School Tales* about her experiences as a young Saskatchewan teacher in a one-room school, tells of her experiences when:
The unsuspecting teacher would hear a knock on the school door, a man would walk in announcing he was the School Inspector, and suddenly her career was perhaps at stake… I remember him as being a rather surly man whose eyes seemed to pierce right through me. I had the impression he figured it was his job to make me feel like I didn’t know anything at all about teaching… later I learned he may have had a reputation for being extra critical of women teachers. (p. 22)

This experience was no different for my mother and not much different for me.

Mom said she never had a female superintendent in all her teaching years and only one female principal, “…and the men probably hadn’t spent much time in a classroom, probably got their jobs either because they were men or they couldn’t last in the classroom.” These words were said with a derisive snort. I thought this was a very astute observation/recollection from a 90 year old former woman educator. Historically, men have dominated academic settings (Lather, 1991). It seems that male domination of the occupation carried over into the administration side of education even though, in both our experiences, the profession was female dominant in classroom roles. She and I agreed that although we both had been offered odd chances at administrative roles later in our careers, we chose to stay in the classroom because I said I was a teacher, not a ‘pencil pusher’ and Mom said that she never felt the “need to discipline other teachers’ students”. Lather (1991) addresses both Mom’s and my reasoning by aiming, “to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position”. We experienced the inequality but for different reasons chose to accept and live with our situations at the time.
Tompkins’ (1996) daring experimentation with curriculum, among other teaching practices, also parallels those of her predecessors, except for one very marked difference—her experiences were of teaching in the Academy and her predecessors were in the one-room school. Tompkins writes of her experiences where she had “been experimenting wildly in [her] undergraduate class… [finding] it exhilarating, this seat-of-the-pants pedagogy” (p. 158). But not so the keepers of the one-room schools; curriculum was dictated and their experimentation was most often the result of necessity, not frivolity. Their teaching experiences were full of ‘make do’s. When I shared Tompkins’ ‘exhilaration’ with Mom she said that exhilaration for her was when “all the kids were quietly working in their desks, allowing me to get more boardwork done.” Interesting that ‘exhilaration’ for Tompkins was willful experimentation and for Mom ‘exhilaration’ meant survival.

Mom claims to not being exposed to any theorists of the time (see Chapter 4) but I am not sure that “survival” is accurate. Perhaps her reply sprang directly from her notion of good pedagogical practice at the time, even though she did not seem to have any recall of curriculum workers. Lewis (2009) further explains:

Informed by the dominant cognitive models of the times such as scientific management, social efficiency movement and developmental psychology folks such as W. W. Charters whose activity analysis approach to curriculum construction influenced George Counts and Ralph Tyler; Tyler’s transformation of measurement to the grander idea of evaluation enshrined in learning objectives in turn influenced Benjamin Bloom and his taxonomy and learning for master; both their works were instrumental in shaping education through the 1950’s to the
present. However, it was the work of Franklin Bobbitt, through his scientific approach to curriculum making that set the course for Count, Tyler, Bloom and numerous other educators in the evolution of the technical approach to teaching. Bobbitt’s curriculum making method has had a profound and lasting influence upon teaching, schooling, and the curriculum; and still lies at the core of curriculum development. (p. 15)

Mom’s claim to ‘survival’ may not have, in her opinion come from her theoretical understanding of curriculum constructors of the day, however, ‘theoretical’ or not, like many teachers she did what was necessary to survive.

My mother and I did a shared reading of Gloria Mehlmann’s (2008) *Gifted To Learn* as part of ‘our research’. When I asked Mom if she would be interested in reading this particular full-length book, written by a Saskatchewan educator, she replied, “Yes,” but I could hear hesitation in her reply. She had already read bits, pieces and sometimes all of many of the rest of the memoirs that I had been reading, and I thought perhaps that she was getting tired of it all. She was insulted to think that I thought she might be tired! Her concern was that she might not be able ‘to keep up’ with me and that she would, in her words, “hold me up”. However, she always had her homework done and sometimes I did not. This research process will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Mehlmann’s telling of pedagogy, interactions with students and parents, and her Normal School training provided fodder for discussion and debate. Mom both correlated and criticized Mehlmann’s memoirs. In Chapter 5, these comparisons are part of the discussion.
Qualitative Research – Which Method?

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” that “allows our inquiries to travel – inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place” (p. 49, italics in the original). The memoirs I read allowed me to do just that – peer into their stories from all angles and temporalities. Each woman not only has a story to tell, but uses the story to enhance their personal learning and awareness, while sharing a story with the reader and perhaps augmenting the readers’ awareness as well.

Merriam (2009) says, that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p.13). She also likes an older definition by Van Maanen (1979) that says, “Qualitative research…seek[s] to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (p. 13). Qualitative research does not involve measuring in the same ways that quantitative research does; it has two unique features: “(a) the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted, and (b) the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 5). As I further explored qualitative research I found myself wondering if narrative inquiry, one method of qualitative research, was the most suitable method for this research.

In doing this research it was not possible to verify the stories of my Mother in a measurable format. Polkinghorne (1998) argues that, “Experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. Thus, the study
of human behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience” (p. 1). Qualitative research is emergent, making it a better research tool for this study. “Qualitative researchers try not to impose a rigid a priori framework on the social world; they want to learn what constitutes important questions from the participants themselves” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.11). Merriam (2009) concurs with this statement, “[o]ne of the assumptions underlying qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in qualitative research” (p. 213). The narratives presented here offer believability, plausibility or verisimilitude; they invite others to enter the story and listen; they may facilitate an interpretive understanding that is continually changing and evolving.

In narrative research the researcher will take the stories from experience and “examine them from other angles or contexts, social, historical, political or economic” (Shacklock as cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 157). Subsequently, much of narrative research becomes interpretive. We are who we are because of our stories, and stories come from our experience (Bruner, 1996). Our stories can be understood and communicated narratively; however, there is also the element of interpretation. This interpretation can lead to knowing beyond the personal story and can lead to history (Bruner, 1986). This study is a part of the life history of my mother and the study of life histories as data falls easily into the interpretative paradigm of narrative inquiry. Within this context subjectivity becomes an issue.
Subjectivity

What is truth? Is there truth? Will Mom and I be able to ascertain the ‘truth’ of her recollection, the veracity of her stories? Are any of these proofs required? Rossman and Rallis (2003) maintain that “[s]ubjectivists hold that the very notion of truth is problematic” further arguing that “except for certain principles about the physical world, there are few truths that constitute universal knowledge; rather, there are multiple perspectives about the world” (p. 38). I recognize that the truth, the veracity of Mom’s narrative, will be as she recollects the events based on her experiences.

There are several assumptions made by subjectivists that support narrative inquiry; “Contextual dependency, “working understandings:, getting close to the participants, focus on understanding subjective experience, comparative logic, case study designs, researcher as “instrument”, interpretive analysis of data, and data in the form of word” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 39). These assumptions helped me to form a clearer understanding of reality and perceived reality, as well as what actually necessitates ‘truth’. Am I seeking “Truth – with a capital T – or truths – multiple perspectives?” (p. 40). Certainly, the latter is the goal. As Lewis and Adeney (2014) state, “[we] contend that our work does not purport some bold TRUTH, but rather provides some truths about being human and human being” (p. 169). Mom’s story provides truth about her ‘being’.

Is it important that the singular voice, the voice of my mother be heard? “Subjectivist assumptions argue that much knowledge production in the social sciences has privileged formal academic knowledge, thereby excluding other ways of knowing. Therefore, many with subjectivist assumptions seek to create spaces where marginalized voices can be heard” (p. 40). This study of the lived experiences of my mother will
adhere to subjectivist assumptions in that “understanding lived experience – the researcher’s and those whose lives she studies – is the legitimate project of inquiry” (p.40). Subjectivist thinking legitimizes, for me, the use of inquiry for this study. What then is the reality, the ‘truth’ of my mother’s story? Can I make the subjectivist assumption that “humans construct understanding of reality through their perceptual and interpretive faculties? Social processes are continually created by human interpretation; they do not constitute reality per se but are concepts that describe it” (p. 41). Finally, this research is one person’s narrative, one researcher’s study of these lived experiences using subjectivity as philosophy, as subjectivists “hold that human agency is crucial for shaping everyday lives and larger social patterns. They maintain that unpredictability is the hallmark of human action; the goal here is to describe and interpret how people make sense of and act in their worlds” (p.42). Subjectivist assumptions align closely with qualitative research, specifically with narrative inquiry allowing the researcher to “focus on individual experiences, small case studies, firsthand knowledge of the social world, and interpretive analyses of data. Research guided by these assumptions moves toward ‘working understandings’ of the subjective world rather than general predictive laws” (p.42). There is little chance of verification, other than incidentally through historical text and photographs of the data gathered. This is Mom’s story as she tells it.

Lewis (2011) in *Storytelling as Research/Research as Storytelling* refers to Petra Munro Hendry (2007) in her questioning of the “power we have given narrative research to explain our lives” (p. 491) suggests that we “contemplate what narrative might be without research” (p. 497). She asks us to entertain transcending the current practice(s) in
narrative research such that “to increase our rigor we need to be more faithful to our relationships and not impose more methods” (p. 494); as researchers think about a place where “research is not ultimately about interpretation but about faith. Trusting in the stories and the storyteller” (p. 495). (p. 506)

I placed my trust in Mom; I had faith, complete faith in her ability to relate her experiences, herstory.

Summary

The literature reflects the themes of the study. Readings related to feminist theory in education were considered. Also, the transition in education from the home into the formal school situation was addressed, including reference to the historical one-room school. Contemporary memoirs served to illuminate various other teaching experiences as reference for the study. Teacher memoirs of the era of the study support the focus of the research illuminating the lack of narratives of the lived experiences of young women leading up to their teaching careers. Finally, readings of the various types of qualitative research, including reference to subjectivity, helped with my determination to use narrative inquiry to complete this thesis.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction:

It was during one of my graduate classes that I came to realize that narrative inquiry would be the methodology most suited to both my mother’s story and the telling of it. In most living things there is evolution and this study is no different, evolving into a narrative of particular lived experiences of my mother. This chapter will address the research supporting the choice of narrative, as well as discuss the methods used to construct the narrative text.

The Relational Factor in This Study

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that:

Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation, and we as researchers are in relation to participants. Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation. (p. 189)

This study is one of relation and as Clandinin and Connelly point out it is relational. Further to this the inquirer and the participant are mother and daughter creating another layer of intimacy to the standard roles in this type of research.

This thesis is a study of the lived experiences of my mother, as told by my mother to me. I am a story teller and I have always wanted to tell my mother’s story. The co-inquirers in this project are both female. We are both long-time educators. We are mother and daughter. We were co-researchers. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to make the stylistic choice to use the intimate ‘we’ in the study.
Why Narrative Inquiry?

Narrative inquiry is not just storytelling, it is “the study of experience as story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also argue that:

Narrative inquiry is much more than “look for and hear story.” Narrative inquiry in the field is a form of living, a way of life…narrative inquiry, from this point of view, is one of trying to make sense of life as lived. (p. 78)

I soon came to realize that Mom and I would make this study ‘a way of life’ very nearly until the end of her life. We researched, wrote, discussed, read, and reflected, working towards a place where we, not only had recorded the story but we were in a place to make some sense of the story. This intertextual methodology not only allowed me to conduct the interviews and obtain the story but also, with the help of my mother, my co-researcher, to make sense of the data and the experiences of the story. This chapter will articulate my understanding of narrative as well as explain why this research approach is most suited to this study.

Humans live life through experience. My interpretation of narrative inquiry is that it allows for the inquirer to live relationally with the participants and to become part of the inquiry as it proceeds. Lewis (2000) observes that:

Narrative is both phenomenon and method” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2) in this approach in that teachers tell stories and researchers collect those stories through a variety of methods, and then, researchers tell stories, or narratives, about those stories (data) collected. In this sense narrative inquiry is “a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds” (p. 4). From the outset of such a collaboration there is an importance placed upon
the researcher to ensure that she or he “listen first” to the teacher’s story and that it is the teacher “who first tells his or her story.” This does not silence the researcher; however, it ensures that the teacher, “who has long been silenced in the research relationship,” is provided with the opportunity to share her or his story in order for the story to realize the “authority and validity that that the research story has long” enjoyed (p. 4). In such research there is a need to work toward developing a “research relationship” where both the teacher and the researcher “feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories” (p.4). In the end what is presented are “collaborative stories,” mutually constructed by the teacher and the researcher out of the lives of both. It is posited that in this form of narrative inquiry what is at stake is less a matter of working theories and ideologies and more a question of the place of research in the improvement of practice and of how researchers and practitioners may productively relate to one another…By listening to participant stories of their experience of teaching and learning, we hope to write narratives of what it means to educate and be educated (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12) (From Lewis Unpublished Dissertation 2000, UQ pp. 255-256).

As we are mother and daughter, the natural progression then, for me to tell my mother’s story, is narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) support this by saying that narrative inquiry is:

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 they interpret their past in terms of these stories…Narrative inquiry, the study
of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (p. 477)

Story is “neither raw sensation nor cultural form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415). Experiences, whether lived or narrated, constitute our stories which create the data that is used in narrative inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative as the study of the “storied lives of the people involved” (p. 42). Keep in mind that the centre of this thesis are the interviews with my mother about her lived experiences and that “life - as we come to it and as it comes to others - is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p. 17). Clandinin and Connelly go on to say that, “[e]xperience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. In effect, narrative thinking is part of the phenomenon of narrative” (p. 18). My mother and I came to our sessions with intent to not just record the words, but to discuss the experience of the story and how this data impacted my mother’s life and her lived experiences.

Although I rely on the theorizing of Clandinin and Connelly to set the theoretical framework for this thesis, I also found support for my choice of methodology in other theorists. Narrative inquiry is the study of lived experience through narrative; it is storytelling with purpose. Narrative is a form of meaning making and recognizing the meaning of individual experiences by noting how they function as a whole. Lieblich and Josselson (1997), further adding to my understanding, write, “It is the unity of a person’s
life as it is experienced and articulated in stories that express this experience” (p. 7).

Lived experience has little value unless it is connected to story (Lieblich and Josselson, 1997).

I also defer to Conle and deBeyer, (2008) for justification for my focus on one individual, who argue that narratives studies are conducted with smaller groups of individuals and individuals have a voice, adding that they “require engagement of audience, rather than tight argumentation and extensive literature reviews” (p. 44). My participant number was small, one subject, who also became my co-researcher. Mom’s stories are many layered. I do not fool myself into thinking that I have it complete. It is, however, how she told it to me, how she recalled it in our many sessions and conversation. I believe I have taken up her lived experiences from those sessions in a way that provides a glimpse into its multitudes, its grandeur.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilder (1998) also informed my choice of methodology as they say that narrative inquiry “does not require replicability of results as a criterion for its evaluation” (p. 10). I could not replicate this study in any way. Mom’s story unfolded, nearly spontaneously, as the interviews continued and reproduction of any kind would be impossible, at the time and certainly now that she has died. Finally, Lieblich et al add that “there are usually no prior hypotheses” (p. 10) which again aligned with the choice of narrative inquiry. I approached the study with no provisional theories or preset assumptions. Mom and I had nothing to prove, only a story to tell - a small part of her life story.
Life Histories or Parts Thereof

This study of my mother became a partial life history – the part of my mother’s story leading to her initial teaching experiences. In gathering life histories, or selected parts of them, it is incumbent upon the researcher “to inform the participant that stories, not fact, are being collected” (Shacklock cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 156). The participants must be allowed opportunity to take responsibility for their stories in a natural and non-threatening environment with the researcher asking questions that function as prompts, allowing the participants to relate their stories. “Life history interviews are not just about collecting facts or reports on life events, they are about constructing a language-practice place where a life story is put together by the participant-conversants” (Shacklock cited in Somekh & Lewin, p.156). Lieblich (1993) refers to this construction as an account.

Storytellers seek to create the effect of telling the whole story, whereas in narrative inquiry the concern is often with a particular part of a story which fulfils the research parameters (Wisniewski & Hatch, Eds. 1995). As narrative inquirers we are not seeking ‘Truth’. What is truth but one person’s perspective on a subject at any given time? Stories cannot produce truth because, in fact, we live most of our lives in a world that is mostly made up of stories, and multiple perspectives of those stories that exist (Bruner, 1996). Josselson and Lieblich (1993) define narrative identity as “the unity of a person’s life as it is experienced and articulated in stories that express this experience” (p. 7). It is important to note that this methodology was not invented by theorists to establish authenticity of stories as a form of research. Most importantly, narrative inquiry generates more questions than it provides answers.
My purpose, however, is not to make meaning of the experiences but rather to find meaning in the telling of the stories of the participant. Of course, this data could be read and interpreted differently but narrative inquiry allows the stories to create their own meanings. Every narrative inquiry is partial and bound by perspective (Neuman & Peterson, Eds. (1997).

**Is This Research or Just a Story?**

Shacklock and Thorpe (2005) ask, “Who will establish these criteria and make judgments about the worth of your inquiry – your community of scholars, your co-participants, you?” (p. 158). My participant, my mother, was originally concerned about the worthiness of the study. Initially, she could not grasp the fact that this type of research constituted knowledge. Remember, Mom was a long time educator, one that retired in 1980 when accountability was most often measured in numerical outcomes. If something cannot be measured, it is not worthy. I have been part of or witnessed many professional academic arguments about assessment and accountability and I have only been retired for three years! Some things do not change. She and I came to realize its worthiness was its creation, the fact that the narrative had been created. Also, for Mom, the true validation was the fact that my advisor (in her vernacular, my ‘teacher’) said that it was so, recognizing the generational deference to teachers as authorities.

Not only is narrative inquiry about finding meaning in stories, it is emergent - in the process of finding itself. Narrative inquiry is relational – it does not always go where the researcher assumes or says that it will go. It is the opportunity to share stories, to tell stories and to discuss meanings of the stories. My findings are interpretive; they cannot be otherwise, as I really see myself as a conveyor of the lived experiences of the
participant in this study, my mother. My purpose, however, is not to make meaning of
the experiences but rather to find meaning in the telling of the stories of the participant.
Of course, this data could be read and interpreted differently; the narrative inquirer
cannot escape interpretive renderings in the writing of the stories any more than the
reader cannot read without an interpretive lens.

The relational aspect of the narrative became a part of the methodology. It could
not be otherwise. This study became a story within the story, if you will – the story of
Mom and me researching together, establishing yet another kind of relationship with her
in the last years of her life. This relational space relates to the professional literature of
the women teachers that she and I studied. We made connections to them through her
experiences, some parallel and others as comparison, and incidentally through mine.
This thesis is about my mother, but it is also about her and me researching together,
recollecting a particular aspect of her life that she and I shared. I could have focused on
marriage or parenting, also shared experiences, which is entirely different from having a
focus on education.

If I Could Do It Again

Carol Heilbrun (1988), on one aspect of female aging, writes, “For women who
have awakened to new possibilities in middle age, or who were born into the current
women’s movement and have escaped the usual rhythms of the once traditional female
existence, the last third of life is likely to require new attitudes and new courage” (p.124).
Heilbrun’s words could have been written specifically about Mom and me – both women
fiercely intent on further education later in life – she finally completing her Bachelor of
Education degree just before retiring from teaching and me embarking on a Master’s
degree immediately following retiring from teaching. Eerily parallel. More than once during our study she would comment that she would have loved to do what I was doing. One day I asked her what she meant and she said that if she could do it again she would “study and write about something, not sure what, not about me of course. Maybe about how schools have changed or something.” Whenever I took her from her Personal Care Home to the nearby school for various functions she would often marvel at the technology, especially the computers in classrooms saying, “Imagine, a whole room full of them and some in every classroom.” Her incredulity at the technology emphasized her realizations of the changes in education.

My understanding of the purpose of narrative inquiry is that it is not to provide a single definitive answer but to open up possibilities for new questions and ways of thinking and that it can rely on cultural expectations of readers. In narrative inquiry I discovered that there can be rejection of conventional truth claims. My co-researcher, Mom, and I did not feel compelled to verify her stories as true, to triangulate details, but rather she related the events as she recalled them. Lewis (2011) in Storytelling as Research/Research as Storytelling says:

When I recollect my experiences and share them through stories, I am eliciting my own potential for making meaning. Kierkegaard (1983) said that “repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (p. 131). “It is through genuine repetition, storytelling, that humans narrate ways of knowing and being. We live and think the world within a story structure that is brain-based and deeply human (Young & Saver, 2001, p.
80) springing from the depths of the human psyche both individually and collectively. (p. 505)

In some sense, Mom and I were both looking back on life lived - life as teachers and as women. How then to best do this with an aging subject?

Methods

This thesis is highly inter-textual: Mom and I did a shared reading of Gifted to Learn, we read teacher memoirs and local histories together, she created a newspaper with her students, she re-created pieces of her history specifically for this study, and most significantly, we created this text together. This is method, this relationship between texts and the shaping of a text by another text.

Other methods that I used to gather data were reflective in part of the needs of the participant, my mother. She was more than capable mentally each session that we gathered data but sometimes made physical adaptations for her comfort. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest that, “The techniques of qualitative research provide ways of discovering and interpreting aspects of reality: they are the formal way of gathering information. Through observing, interviewing, and documenting material culture, qualitative researchers capture and represent the richness, texture, and depth of what they study” (p. 172). I captured to the best of my ability the essence of the words used by my mother.

Merriam (2009) says that “[data] are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (p. 85). During our data gathering Mom would often reference a piece of information with deference saying, “I’m not sure how important this is but I remember…” and she would clarify a detail or add something,
sometimes questioning the importance of her edit and usually accepting my confirmation of its importance. Narrative inquiry seems to provide the framework for a study such as this because “[at] its simplest, a life history is a life story or oral history with additional dimensions” (Casey, as cited in Somekh and Lewin (2005), p. 156). This became my working definition of life history. We gathered our data, her recollection of her story, allowing for further dimensions such as discussing teaching methods then and now. This method certainly suited the study. The researcher adheres most closely to narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000), informed by feminist pedagogy (hook, 2000; Bloom 1998; Weedon, 2004).

**Constructing the Narrative**

Methods for data gathering included both semi-structured and structured interviews (O’Leary, 2004); both digitally and manually recorded. Rossman and Rallis (2003) observe that:

> [t]extbooks on qualitative research typically treat the skills of observing, interviewing, and studying material culture separately, but this is a bit artificial. They are integrated facets of a qualitative study, and skill in one relates to skill in another…a good interviewer is also a good observer, just as a good observer tends to be a good interviewer. Conducting a rich, informative interview requires strong questioning and listening skills as well as finely honed observation skills. (p. 173)

Merriam (2009) suggests that “all questions use flexibility…usually specific data required [with the] largest part of interview guided by a list of questions or issues to be
explored [with] no predetermined wording or order” (p. 89). The combination of questioning, listening and observing became the mix of my methodology.

The data gathered, or field texts, which according to Clandinin & Connelly “are created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience” (2000, p. 92). They go on to say that “because field texts are our way of talking about what passes for data in narrative inquiry and because data tend to carry with them the idea of objective representation of research experience, it is important to note how imbued field texts are with interpretation.” I came to realize early in the course of this study that in the telling of Mom’s story I had to be careful not to write what I expected to hear but rather to ‘stick to the script’ thus most of the interviews were recorded. This served two purposes: one, for the sake of the study, to use the transcripts of these sessions for Mom and me to corroborate and to add detail and to foster discussion and two, I have Mom’s voice audio recorded for all time telling her story.

And So We Began…

The very first recording took place on a beautiful summer day when Mom and I were visiting, on my deck, at our summer cottage by the lake.

*So Mom, you know that I have decided to write a thesis for my Masters and I’ve been thinking that I’d like to do your story, maybe mine in with it, about our being teachers in one-room schools. There were lots of teachers your age but not many, well, none that I know of, my age who have had that experience. It would be a good way to get that part of your life history and I just think that I would like to do it. So what do you think?*
There was no immediate response and then she humbly said, “Do you think it’s a good enough idea?” I noted the qualifier ‘enough’ in her reply, questioning her worth as a subject; I thought of feminist subservience. However, I assured her that it was my idea and that it, indeed, was good enough, that it was worthy. She pondered my words awhile and then with a flash of those blue eyes said, “Let’s get to work.” And so we did.

It did not end up being ‘our story’ but rather evolved into a different story, Mom’s story. There was animation in her voice every single day that we worked together on the study. She proved to be a worthy co-researcher. This process would not be without its challenges; it would be a long journey, and the road was rough at times. Nonetheless, Mom was up to the challenge.

**Will the Focus Have to Change?**

This project was not always easy work, especially for Mom. Her life was drawing to a close during the process. We both knew this. We had some struggles and challenges along the way. Shortly after we began our work in earnest Mom fell ill, and we were told that she was dying. She had had a few brushes with death but this time we were told she had just a few days to live. (We actually gave away all of her clothes at this point, for which she never forgave us!) She then entered hospice for palliative care. ‘Hospice’, ‘palliative care’, ‘dying’ – not words one synthesizes easily. We had spent many hours together researching. Now, I spent many hours with her and my family in that room, no longer researching together but waiting and watching, aware of the inevitable, but still hoping for more time with Mom – for me, not self-serving time to work on my study, but time to be her daughter, just a little while longer. The quiet hum of the hospice became my mantra; it was a peaceful time as I held her hand, watching her breathe. Sitting by her
bedside waiting for her to pass, I organized what information I had and thought about how best I could use it and how my research may have to change. Would it still work as I had imagined? Would the focus need to change? These questions were fleeting thoughts, darting in and out of my mind, as Mom clung to life, waiting for death.

She did not die, not then. I believe part of the reason that she rallied and walked out of the hospice nearly two months later was because we weren’t finished ‘our work’. She came to the Manor, the personal care home, in Avonlea while we, her family, looked for a suitable care home for her in Regina. Clandinin et al. (2007) say that “[E]vents and people always have a past, present and a future. In narrative inquiry it is important to always try to understand people, places and events as in process, as always in transition” (p. 23). We transitioned to a new place to work as Mom never went back to the city. Somehow, this place not far from her birthplace suited her well. And it was perfect for me. I had her right where I wanted her, close to me and my family and close to ‘our work’.

Are We Working on Your Paper Today or Are We Visiting?

I also conducted critical, albeit informal, conversations with the co-inquirer throughout many months. Often the questions were given to her ahead of time because of my mother’s age. Usually she had fully answered the questions, in complete sentences, grammatically perfect, in her teacher script handwriting by the next session, and the discussions would begin. This became method; she read the questions and prepared written answers. Writing and talking are different, critically different. We talked, I reviewed my notes and Mom edited my notes. I recorded, I reviewed my transcripts and Mom edited the transcripts, but we did a lot more talking than I did writing. And Mom
did most of the talking. In the course of this study I came to realize that in the telling of
Mom’s story I had to be careful not to write what I expected to hear but rather to really
listen and record her words, manually or electronically as she told them to me. This was
difficult as try as I might with descriptors, things like voice inflection, word emphasis,
eye emotions and body language were difficult to put into words. The duration of the
sessions was completely dependent on my mother’s ability to participate. I often tired
before she did. However, she made my data collecting separate from my visiting. Upon
entering her room her usual greeting was, “Are we working on your paper today or are
we visiting?” This is important, keeping in mind that writing and talking are different –
she read the questions and prepared written answers. On most days she preferred working
to visiting. There were some other accommodations, but not many; after all Mom was
ninety years of age at the time. She would insist on clarification of the questions, for
example, saying, “Do you mean this or that, and if it’s this, then that’s a different story”.
But upon reflection she worked, to use one of her frequent descriptors, “like a trooper”.

I would walk in the front door of the Manor and depending on the time of day the
residents (such a clinical descriptor for people living in such places) may or may not have
been in their rooms but out in the common area. Mom was a participator in all things all
of her life and she wasn’t about to miss out on a Bingo or a concert in the Manor.
However, if she happened to be out of her room for some organized activity and I
entered the area, she would immediately catch my eye as I moved toward the group, give
me the nod down the hall, disengage herself and we would head to her room so we could
‘get to work’.
We would go over her notes written on backs of check registers, used envelopes or various other scraps of paper (Mom was a child of the Great Depression so nothing was ever wasted), usually after the previous day’s ‘work’. Mom took this study very seriously. It was important to her that “things be right” and more than once she would greet me with, “something came to me in the night, we should fix it.” One of my fondest memories is arriving at the door of her room and watching her hunched over her ‘work’, scratching away (usually in red pen) willing her arthritic fingers to do as she told them.

Unlike the rest of the teacher memoirs and local histories that we read, our shared reading of Gloria Mehlmann’s (2008) Gifted To Learn was just that – she and I read it together, every word. It was a way of establishing common ground, a structure for our conversations. Sometimes we literally read together, usually me reading aloud and she following along, interrupting with comments or corrections, both to my reading and the content. Sometimes we assigned sections and then discussed them at our next visit. Once we began the book, it became our only focus until we had finished, usually covering two, and sometimes three chapters at a session. I let her set the pace. She was always prepared, not just with the reading completed but most often with insight, clarification and/or questions. This was a fascinating experience and yielded both focus for lively discussion and served as a springboard to various educational debates. I believe this book achieved my goal of presenting Mom with a contemporary reflection of a time in education that she could relate to but did not necessarily agree with totally. Mom always referred to the author as ‘Mehlmann’, always with a tad of derisiveness in her voice as if to wonder about the truthfulness of Mehlmann’s anecdotes! I would have loved to have
been able to get the two of them physically together, unfortunately Mom died before I could make this happen.

**Mother’s Methodology**

A friend transcribed the digital recordings. I chose an outside source as “transcription is deeply interpretive” (Riessman, 2008, p. 29). When I received the transcriptions I would immediately take them to Mom; she anxiously waited for each new addition. She would then read through the documents very carefully and give them back to me, fully edited, rich with her commentary, again, usually in red pen. She also very carefully edited all of the notes that I typed after our data collecting conversations. Mom edited most data three times; once as a read through (“to get a feel”), twice for correction (“to get it right”) and three times for verification (“to make sure that it is right”). This was one of my methods, our methods, of data collecting and this process was doubly useful because while editing she would often recall stories forgotten or develop further insights through systematic recollections.

Narrative research and narrative inquiry in particular is recursive; it cannot be otherwise (Lewis, 2000). Denzin notes:

[Such texts] always return to the writerly self – a self that spills over into the world being inscribed. This is a writerly self with a particular hubris that is neither insolent nor arrogant. The poetic self is simply willing to put itself on the line and to take risks. These risks are predicated on a simple proposition: This writer’s personal experiences are worth sharing with others” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225).
Lewis (2000) adds, “It is process that tends toward a circularity of sorts as one composes and refigures recursively meanings of experiences.” He further explains that, “[N]arrative is necessarily recreative, recursive in that our cognitive evolutionary being requires it, in order to continue the story that is humanity. It is in-and-through-story-in-time that being and meaning are understood” (Lewis, (2007) p. 10). I engaged with a story to recover further stories leading to finding meaning in her story and in our shared research story.

Mom was determined that any data collected for my, for our research, was accurate. As an example, I recall the evening telephone call, one of many she made for various reasons, but this one in particular, to correct the order of the students in the Grade One row in the first school in which she taught. Samples of Mom’s manuscripts (see Figure 2), serving as authentic data (complete with edits), are also attached as appendices. She indeed was my co-researcher.
“I didn’t have a proper stick so we used a rope between the two poles, I remember that. We had so little the kids had to bring stuff and as I said I played with them every recess and noon and when the ball time came I played on the team and umpired as well.”
“I did that too. I usually pitched for both teams and then I umpired, because there was never enough when I taught in my one room country school.”
“Well they all played on it, all 10 of them, 5 on each side and I think I played on both sides.”
“Yes, that is what I used to do.”
“They learned to play ball, learned the rules, and then when it came to the sports days, they knew nothing about sports. The teacher before me decided there weren’t enough of them to bother with but I taught them how to run and jump and broad jump and I taught them military exercises of some kind that we learned at Normal. There was arms bending and heads turning and I don’t know what all, I can’t remember.”
“We’ll find that out.”
“I taught math, and there was an event at the field meet and we took first in whatever it was.”
“And where was that field meet at, do you remember?”
“It was at Morefield and they would change it from year to year to different places.”
“So what did these little ones think when you took them to this field meet? How did you get there?”
“I have no idea.”
“Yes, interesting.”
“I had no idea how we got there, parent’s had to take us.”
“I guess so because when we were kids and we went from Parry and Dummer, I don’t think we went on the bus I think our parents took us. Everybody went to the track meet in those years. So how did your kids do at the track meet when they never had any training before you.”
“They did well, they got a lot of firsts and we were such a small school they competed well.”
Clandinin & Connelly (2000) as well as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, (1998) describe the diversity of data sources available for use in narrative inquiry; some of these were of use to me as a researcher. I have included photographs relevant to the research text and time, establishing the temporal nature of this work, the back and forth between the research present and remembered past, helping to further interpret and to add clarification to Mom’s story. As narrative researchers we try to understand how past and present are related and also try to create understanding of the influence the past may have on the future (Clandinin et al. 2007). A virtual gold mine for us and our research was when samples of work from former students were made available to us; these became the focus of much discussion, also serving as reference to time and place in her life and career.

Examination of my experiences using my personal journals, my daybooks and personal recollections serve as sources of data. They are useful in that they provide counterpoint to many of Mom’s experiences and observations, useful for argument and discussion but not meant to become part of the formal study.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003) “the trustworthiness of a qualitative research project is judged by two standards. First, does the study conform to standards for acceptable and competent practice? Second, does it meet standards for ethical conduct? (p. 63). Lewis & Adeney (2014) add to this by saying:

believability means to (hold dear, love; to like, desire) and authenticity mean (original, principal, and genuine). Narrative research orbits trustworthiness because in its simplest form a story and the storyteller inherently ask for trust:

Could this happen? How close is this to reality? What does it tell us about life?
The nexus of validity in narrative research work is with believability, authenticity, quality, power, and authority...the story aims for engagement and resonance; the story is judged upon whether it evokes in the listener the feeling that the experience shared in the story is possessed of authenticity and believability...simply put, a story must be of believed value. (p. 171)

Mom’s story is believable; it speaks both to her innate honesty and to her sense of personal history. It happened. She was somewhat reluctant at first to accept that her stories as she told them to me were worthy; she soon realized their worth and became a most willing and able participant.

In keeping with the approved requirements of the University of Regina Research Ethics Board, my mother reviewed the consent form recognizing that some confidentiality may be compromised. As this is a study of my family members, there will be identity based on relationship. However, this was clearly addressed on the consent form, and was verbally addressed with my Mother as well, so there could be no confusion.

The Gift

I did not choose this topic, this story of a particular period in my mother’s life, to give her a sense of purpose or to give her something to occupy herself with when she was alone, nor was it to give us something to visit about. It was purposeful, this was my thesis, and she treated it as such. This was serious stuff, for her and for me. But this study also became a wonderful gift – one that we gave one another – a loving exchange. I believe that I provided her with the gift of time and attention as the end of her life was closing in on her, and my gift from her was allowing her a way to contribute in a most
meaningful way to my life. She became important to me, in a vital not patronizing way. This gift of living the ethic of life-long education that life embodies was part of our mutual gift. There were few, if any, of her peers in her situation that had that lived experience, the experience of reflection with such purpose. I believe the entire experience to be unique – two women who loved each other with devotion constructing a narrative in a hospice.

**Summary**

I aligned myself mostly with Clandinin and Connelly to establish the methodology of Narrative Inquiry for this research, as according to them “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Clandinin & Connelly, along with other narrative inquirers and narrative researchers also point out that it is much more than stories about lived experience. The recursiveness, the interpretive process, our small discoveries made from working through again and again Mom’s stories of lived experience eventually led us to co-create the text. The crux of my research is the telling of my mother’s story. My methods of research were designed to allow for the telling of my mother’s stories, essentially a family story (Clandinin and Connelly). The main method was the research interview conducted to suit the physical needs of the participant, which were few. Shared reading was another useful method in gathering data as was the examination and discussion of certain relevant artifacts.
Chapter 4: Mom’s Story

Introduction

The stories that follow are based on interviews with my mother focusing on particular topics. These stories of her lived experiences serve to structure the narrative. Each section begins with a quotation of Mom’s to serve as introduction. For clarity I have organized the data chronologically, beginning with a brief background of her family, her birth and culminating with her final teaching experience in a one-room school. I include supporting photographs, documents and artifacts. Merriam (2009) supports the use of documents as data saying, “Public records are the official, ongoing records of a society’s activities” (p. 140). Clandinin and Connelly (2004) say that in their view, “[P]hotographs taken by participants or researchers are a kind of field note” (p. 106) and further add that photographs can create memory, “around which we construct stories” (p. 114). Later in the chapter an artifact supplied by a former student of Mom’s serves as supporting data. Merriam says that “[A]rtifacts are “things” or objects in the environment differentiated from documents that represent some form of communication (e.g., official records, newspapers, diaries)” (p. 139). The stories are as she related them to me. All quotations in this chapter, unless attributed to another source, are those of my mother.

Who Was This Person?

According to her birth certificate Doreen Lynn Nesbitt (surname registered incorrectly at birth) was born December 30, 1919 on the NW Quarter of Section 9, Township 10, range 22, West of the second meridian near the town of Dummer, in the province of Saskatchewan. Who was this woman who would live, with ‘all of my marbles’, as she would say, to the age of 91 and a half, completely aware of her world
and the greater world, and contributing as best she could until the very end of her life?
From this humble beginning came my mother, a woman who would go into the world and make her mark.

Her birthplace speaks to her heritage and to mine; she was born the child of pioneers in an era, to my thinking, so unique that, perhaps, only the colonization of some far distant planet could rival it. I am sure that my grandfather must have thought he had, indeed, landed on some far distant planet when he arrived from Ontario by train in 1903.

The eldest of six children, Harry, my grandfather, my mother’s father, knew there wasn’t much of a future for him on the 100 acre family farm in Ontario, so the lure of land called him west. I am sure there were other times in history when a young man would sit on the steps of the Land Titles building in Regina all night, waiting for a piece of paper that would tell him the exact location where the rest of his life was to unfold; but I only know my Grandpa’s story. This event was how my family came to settle in the Dummer area, 60 miles southwest of Regina, Saskatchewan. What thoughts would have swirled about in his head as he rode the train south of Regina to Milestone, the end of the steel at the time, with $2.00 in his pocket? He walked the last 30 miles southwest to his quarter section purchased for $10.00. He would have stood with his hands by his side, his back arched, hat tilted to the back of his head and gazed on his new land, perhaps with pride, but certainly with awe that the grass never seemed to end as his quarter section of land, his homestead to be, gently rolled off into the distance.

I knew my Grandpa very well. He lived with us when I was a child; he helped to raise me, watching me when Dad was in the field and Mom was at school. He died when I was sixteen; I had plenty of time to ask questions. I only wish that I had. I would have
asked him what he had thought when he first gazed on his homestead. How did he know exactly where his quarter section began and ended in the ocean of prairie grass? How did he know what to do to ‘prove up’ his land? Again, the comparison to colonizing a far off planet seems apt – dealing with so many unknowns in terrain as desolate as the moonscape. Had he known exactly what lay in his future I wonder if he would still have brought his new bride to their two room shack on the prairie?

Harry travelled west early each spring ‘to prove up’ his homestead and work his land. In order to get the title Grampa had to “prove up by breaking at least ten acres each year for three consecutive years, build a house (usually a shack or sod hut), and live on his quarter for at least six months of each year” (Their History Our Heritage: Dummer and Area, 1982, p. 4). This he did. His nearest neighbour was a half mile away, not far by today’s standards but distant back then. Mom said he had to have been lonely. Whether she had actually asked him that or whether it was a logical supposition, I do not know. Each winter he would travel back to Ontario by train to work and to court Flora, who would become my grandmother.

His bride, Flora, the second youngest of eleven children, was born very near to Harry in Ontario. They married there in 1914, and she came west with Harry, as his new bride, and saw her new ‘home’ for the first time that spring. What would she have
thought as she travelled by buggy from the nearest village seven miles away, rolling
down a trail carved into the prairie grass and seeing some hills in the distance?

Figure 4: Application of Harry Nisbett for Entry. (Saskatchewan Archives Board)
At the base of these hills in a natural copse of trees was a tiny two room shack. This was where Harry and Flora would raise their three children. This was where my mother was born and raised.

“...I wasn’t supposed to arrive until the middle of January, but Mother, on the morning of December 30th decided to get her housecleaning done before my anticipated arrival. She proceeded to wash the kitchen ceiling that day. Apparently, that ceiling needed cleaning periodically as the coal/wood burning cook stove often smoked. That evening Mother went into labour...”

**Who Was This Infant?**

Mom knew more about her birth than I do about mine. Do we really ‘know’ the events of our early childhood; are they factual or are they stories that we have heard so often that they become real; the latter, undoubtedly? Mom told her stories with both conviction and detail. I took her at her word. She said, “What I know about my birth was related to me by my dad after my mom passed away in 1945 when I was 25 years old. It was like he wanted me to know.”

It was a winter heavy with snow; no roads, such as they were, were ploughed open, so of course, no cars were able to travel. It was 1919 and Mom couldn’t recollect for sure if the family even had a car. She thought not. Probably because her mother decided to wash her ceiling that day she went into labour early, and she was too far into her labouring for her to get to the Moose Jaw Hospital by train from Dummer, the nearest
station, as she had planned. The custom was to try to be in the city well before delivery date, close to a hospital and doctors, if possible.

Her mother knew that she was in trouble and needed help. This was not her first baby and the previous deliveries had not been easy. There had been a stillborn, which according to Mom “was not unusual in those times.” Mom interjected here to add that her deliveries too had “all four been terrible and you (meaning me) didn’t fare much better.” My grandfather phoned the nearest doctor who lived in Avonlea twenty miles away and he said he would get there “as quick as he could”. “As quick as he could” would be at least 21/2 hours, as Doc Dunnet had to come by team and cutter. What to do?

Decisions had to be made and made quickly. The decision made was for my Grandfather to leave his wife who was in labour, plus Ron, their two year old son, who was sleeping, and go by team and sleigh one mile away to get a neighbour, Mrs. Hadaway, who often served as the community midwife. How frightened my Grandmother must have been, labouring on by herself in that little house on the prairie in the dead of winter. Was there time taken to do anything for her comfort - water in the glass, blankets on the bed, coal in the stove? We’ll never know. By the time they got back my mother had been born. It was December 30, 1919 and it was Mom’s first foray of independence; there was no waiting around for assistance, a trait that stuck with her for the rest of her life!

Her dad’s first impression of her was, “Gee, she’s almost black” (a contrast to her brother Ron, who was red haired and white skinned). But Mrs. Hadaway exclaimed in her English accent, “Good Lor’, she’s not black, she’s chok’n!” As the story goes, this neighbour cum mid-wife, immediately ran to Mom and unwound the cord, which was
wrapped around her neck – “just in time to save [her] life and brain damage.” Mom added that she was always darker skinned than her brother Ron!

Mom knew her birth weight to be eight pounds and nine ounces which was “probably figured by the use of the turkey scale.” I can visualize the baby girl, hoisted in a cloth diaper onto the hook of the scale, no doubt the same one used to weigh the turkeys in the fall of the year. No doubt with nearly the same amount of pride and accomplishment. She also knew, or had been told, that she walked at a year and was trained at a year (I wonder just exactly who was trained, Mom or her mother? However, if I had no running water and neither washing machine nor dryer I, too, probably would have had my kids trained at a year!)

The personality that would emerge became apparent at an early age as her dad recalled that at age one and a half she showed stubbornness when she did not get something that she wanted. This stubbornness in later life was not displayed in order to get ‘things’ that Mom wanted, but rather became a trait that would serve her well in life and in the classroom. It was also noted that she “ate well, slept well and developed normally.” When I asked Mom what she thought that meant exactly she was quick to reply, “Well, I suppose that I slept when I was put to bed, ate what was put on my plate and did what normal children did, whatever that was.” What was really interesting was that when I pushed the ‘normal’ button, she really could not say exactly what that might have been; the blue eyes flashed and that was the end of that conversation!
And so the infant was born, this baby girl who would be the middle child, between two brothers, Ron, the eldest, and Elwood, the youngest. These brothers would become her best friends and remain so until their deaths. These three children would begin life there, in that little house on the prairie. Only Mom would travel the world. One brother would eventually farm ‘the homestead’ and the other would run the General Store in the nearby village of Dummer for 45 years. My mother would forever be the catalyst, the tie that would bind the Nesbitt family.

“...and one of the few times that I can remember not doing as I was told was when I snuck over the hills behind our farm to spy on the gypsies setting up their camp in the coulee...”

**Who Was This Child?**

Mom was raised on the farm with her two brothers as her closest companions. My grandfather eventually added two rooms onto the original homestead house, but even with the addition, it was still tiny. As a little girl I spent many happy hours, family Christmases, birthday celebrations and Sunday suppers in that tiny house that my mother
grew up in. When I was a child Mom’s brother, Uncle Ron and family, lived on the homestead and would host these memorable gatherings. I can see the beige wallpaper with the green floral thingamajigs on the front room walls matching the green thingamajigs on the linoleum; they were never called living rooms in those days, decidedly Canadian lexeme. There were the obligatory lace curtains on the windows and a rug in front of the chesterfield; they were never called couches in those days, perhaps reflecting our British heritage. I never asked Mom where she slept, where she kept her things when she was a little girl in that house. What were her things? Did she have a special dolly and did her dolly have a crib? I wish that I had asked her. I wish that I could pick up the phone now and call her and ask. But I can’t.

When asked about her childhood Mom’s response was:

I would describe my family as a ‘real’ family or ‘normal family’ according to the definition of a family. There was Dad and Mom and their three children: myself and my two brothers, Ronald, two years my elder, and Elwood two years younger. No divorces, intermarriages, adoptions, no common law! Dad and Mom were ideal parents. There was no abusiveness, temper displays, abductions, desertions, swearing, drinking of alcohol, no smoking, no card playing on Sundays.

I believe that Mom’s social description of her family, in her opinion, encompassed families of the day, perhaps not just specifically hers; she was also commenting on families of today. Mom had her own definition of social class. She had little patience for family breakdown and had no tolerance for any kind of abuse, toward neither man nor beast. She said what she felt with no hesitation or fear of what my comments might be. I
decided that my opinions would only create argument and so I collected data and bit my tongue on many occasions, not just this one. After all, this was her story.

These three children were raised by a practicing Orangeman and his wife. (I recognize that opinions about this particular group vary and the historical roles are perhaps geographical and relational, but in order to be faithful to the “lived experience” of my Mom and her perception of her childhood, I am compelled to refer to the society of Orangemen.) Mom’s parents were staunch Protestants and very religious, attending Sunday services in their home and neighbouring homes, as there was no church nearby. She said with a hint of pride and her shoulders back, “Mom and Dad practiced what they preached and we were loved, and we knew it.” When questioned as to the meaning of this statement her reply was, “We did as we were told, and that’s what kids did then.” Again, her observation, I believe, is a comment on today’s children, mine I’m sure included, implying that that is not what kids necessarily do now! She truly was the daughter of an Orangeman, a faithful and practicing Christian her whole life, tolerating other faiths, not embracing any but her own. I doubt the Grandfather I knew would have allowed Mom to marry a Catholic! And she did not.

Their world, as children, was the farm and their parents as she recalled, “Mother was always home when we were little and was there when we came home from school.” In fact, she could only recall two occasions that her mother was absent after school. One time was when her mother went to town, seven miles away, with her dad. “I don’t know what for but it must have been important and Mother didn’t drive.” Her mother had left a note and supper prepared, but she had arrived home before it was time to eat. The other time was when her mother was called to help with delivering a baby. Mom couldn’t
recall the details as “such things weren’t talked about then.” They would occasionally,
she said, visit neighbours on Sundays as “Dad never worked on Sundays and poor
Mother worked all the time, of course, but she never washed clothes nor cleaned on
Sundays. I’m not sure much has changed.” This matter of fact statement of her Mother’s
role created reflection of the roles of women today. We agreed that some things do not
seem to change. Mom and I discussed the traditional roles of the sexes, in the era of her
mother, in her era and in mine, again not always agreeing. She did say that she believed
that women of her mother’s era “had nothing, not a washer, dryer, not running water nor
a thing to make life easy.” And for most pioneer women she was correct.

It seemed these children were seldom, if ever, alone. Mom said, “We never had a
babysitter – no need. Mother and Dad were always there.” Her dad, being a farmer, was
always nearby, “if not in the field, he’d be tinkering with machinery in the buildings in
our yard.” They always had livestock and Mom said that this part of the farm operation
involved the whole family helping with chores: “milking cows by the boys or Mom (she
loved to sing as she milked); separating, (any one available); raising chickens and
turkeys, by Mom and me; cleaning the barn; feeding the animals by the boys; and
gathering the hen eggs, by me usually.” She was afraid of the chickens as she gathered
the eggs and said that she would tap on the side of the roost to distract the hen and then
“slowly slide her hand in and under and grab the eggs, careful not to crack or break
them.” I, too, remember this as my job as a child and having the same fear of those hens,
the beady eyes watching me and the beak ready to peck. “Of course”, she added, “there
was churning to do as Mom always made butter, which often involved every one of us
taking turns, tap, tap, tapping the cream (we had the primitive kind of churn). If we
didn’t do this just right, if it was too hot or too cold, there would be no butter.” There was plenty of work for all to be done but she smiled and mischievously added, “after the work, or during, (when Mother wasn’t looking!) we still had time for fun!” And Mom loved to have fun! Smiling, she said, “Ron, Elwood and I had to invent fun on the farm.”

One of their favourite things to do for fun was play with the farm animals, two horses in particular made for happy times, Teddy and Barney. She reminisced, “Teddy was a dear Shetland pony, a cute bunty type, chestnut colour with a mind of his own” who took Mom and brother Ron to school each day in a cart. She recalled that “occasionally, if something startled him, a partridge on the road, or the gypsies’ camp, which we could see when we got to the top of the hill, Teddy would quickly turn around and gallop home. Ron couldn’t stop him.” When kids, cart and horse barreled back home into the yard she continued, “Mother would pat Teddy for a while, turn him around and send us back to school.” Teddy must have been a true pet for Mom, perhaps even a friend to this child, as she often talked about him and the hours of fun they had with him and the cart.

The second horse that was more than a pet and provided lots of entertainment was Barney. There was love in her voice as she remembered, “three years later when Elwood began school we traveled with a horse, Barney, and buggy. Barney was a dear full-grown horse with the patience of Job. Besides driving us to school he would tolerate us riding
him or just driving him hitched to a stone boat around the yard for some simple reason, picking up a stone or some bit of junk.” Barney would only put up with their nonsense for so long and then he would “hit for the barn. Nothing could stop him, either.” Remember they had to invent fun!

These three siblings were easily occupied and Mom never remembered being bored. She said that “playing games, simple things, also helped to keep us occupied.” They spent “hours playing Hide-and-go-seek in and around the buildings”. Their tiny house was low and Mom said they often played Anti-I-Over, usually until their “Mother hollered to stop, probably to protect the precious few windows that she had.” In summer they swam in the dam, picked wild flowers along the roadside and “found flowers and things” in the pasture. When I asked what kinds of ‘things’ she replied, “Oh, I don’t know, pretty stones, pretty flowers, crocuses in the spring. The boys liked to snare gophers but Mom didn’t like it so they did that on the sly.” There were few times that these three children disobeyed their parents, but snaring gophers was one and spying on the gypsies was another.

Mom and Dad often talked about the gypsies of their childhoods. I had this romantic notion of brightly coloured gypsy caravans with ribbons attached, pulled by sleek ponies driven by dark handsome men, with flashing amber eyes, dressed in tight black pants, white shirts and red (always red) scarves knotted at the throat. My gypsy women wore billowing, bright skirts and white blouses with the obligatory gypsy scarves on their heads. Their necks, hands and wrists dripped with gold and jewels. And do not forget the crystal ball. Not Mom’s gypsies.
The gypsies she recalled “would appear in the summer, one time in our pasture, and another on the road, a half mile from our school and set up camp. “Not gaily coloured caravans” she said, “but kind of shack tents.” Mom laughed when I asked about the brightly coloured clothing and the crystal ball. These gypsies, according to her memory:

wore scruffy clothes and if they had scarves or a crystal ball I didn’t see them because I was too scared. Dad had told us that they trade horses and fix things, but you had to watch them while they did it because they would steal things. Mother told us that they would steal children so we were not allowed to walk up to the coulee to spy. I always did as I was told but one of the few times that I can remember not doing as I was told was when I snuck over the hills behind our farm to spy on the gypsies setting up their camp in the coulee.

I know this coulee well.

My husband and I, through a quirk of fate, came to farm that particular piece of land and I can imagine the daring of this little girl, first of all to walk that far alone, and then to actually spy on the gypsies, and then to get home without her Mother knowing; her Mother never did find her out. When I asked Mom what she saw, her reply was quick, “not much, a bunch of yappy dogs and people milling around, not much.” I told Mom that often in life things are exciting because they are forbidden. She agreed. Although she didn’t see much, she said that she was “scared stiff” the whole time. This telling of the gypsies is a powerful example of Mom’s upbringing. She can remember deliberately disobeying her Mother that day, and when I asked her if she could remember
another time, her little eyes flashed and she said, “No, I can’t. I probably didn’t.” And knowing Mom I am sure that she did not.

This disobedience, or lack thereof, was not so evident in my childhood and even less so with my own children. I don’t have a gypsy story to recall any disobedience, but I clearly remember being told to go to the cellar and sprout the potatoes. I wasn’t very old and it was a dark bin in a dirt part of the cellar. I didn’t say no. I simply walked out the porch door and the wind caught it and it slammed my finger in it. It was badly cut and probably broken. The arthritis in it today is a constant reminder of my disobedience.

Mom remembers that she and her brothers spent a lot of time outside, both winter and summer, as “there wasn’t much room in the house and that’s where I guess we liked to be.” In winter she recalls that they “skated on the dam (although I didn’t have skates - never did - just used one of the boy’s pairs when it was my turn) made snowmen, snow angels, snow forts and often had snowball fights.” When Mom looked this part of our notes over she said quite stoically, “I guess it’s a good thing there was snow so we had something to do in the winter.” I cannot help but think of the thousands of dollars that my husband and I have spent on skates for our children and my dear Mom never had her own pair. Interestingly enough I got my first new pair of skates after I was married!

There was no mention of toys (store bought toys) and like Mom’s dolly, I wish that I could ask, but it would seem there were few, if any, as none were ever mentioned. She said that they made toys out of spools and scraps adding that they “would often play crokinole, checkers and dominoes with our parents, as well as with one another in the winter, especially during the long evenings.” Like most families of that era “Mom worked like a dog, with nothing to make life easy; Dad did too, but they always had time
for us. I don’t remember feeling neglected.” In this case, poverty is relative. They lived like their neighbours so this was normal. She said what she remembered most about her childhood was playing happily with her brothers or amusing herself. When I asked her if she had a good imagination as a child she said she didn’t think so, but she wasn’t sure.

Their play was creative in the purest sense. Mom assured me that there now might be laws against some of the things that they did for fun as children like, “swinging on a rope onto the hay in the loft, rolling down the hill from the barn to the house in a barrel, playing pirates and floating child built rafts on the dam, and going barefoot in the rain. We weren’t ever really supervised but of course, Mother and Dad were always around. No television, no computers, just us.” There may have been a bit of a problem with the ‘pirate game’ (which gives new meaning to the saying ‘it’s all fun until someone loses an eye’) as “during some sort of horseplay Ron stuck Elwood in the eye, probably with a sticksword and Elwood was blind in that eye the rest of his life.” When I questioned what sort of medical treatment he would have received for the eye injury Mom said, “Oh, I don’t know, I don’t remember, so I guess nothing. We never went to the doctor in those days (big pause) unless you were dying.” When I laughingly asked what the point was of going to the doctor when you were dying she said that it was “just what people did.” Life was pretty straightforward.

I asked the question, “Were you ever punished or rewarded as children?” Apparently, punishment for these children was rare as Mom replied, “We were too busy to get into dutch.” She often used this word ‘dutch’ to describe some sort of trouble or misbehaviour; even I knew as a kid to stay out of ‘dutch’! (I discovered that the word in this context is a reference to the hatred of the British for their Dutch rivals and came to be
a slur meaning to be in trouble (to be in dutch. n.d.)). Mom reflected on the family discipline system, “Mother was what I might call diplomatic. Rather than spank us, which she did very seldom (and it never hurt us!), she’d talk to us and make us realize we were misbehaving. Sometimes when Dad was away or in the field and we three kids, in the winter in particular, would get pushing and horsing around, acting stupid, she’d say ‘Just wait till your Dad comes home’!” Mom said that threat was enough to settle them right down but she couldn’t remember a time when her father got after her or her brothers because of her Mother “telling Dad on us.” Her Dad’s weapon was always the threat, “Settle down or I’ll give you a cuff on the ear. However, I don’t recall ever getting a cuff.” But she did remember being struck.

It was one occasion that she clearly recalled in vivid detail when “Dad lost his cool and I certainly can’t blame him.” (Note her use of the word cool here to mean temper; I always got a kick out of her incorporation of modern vernacular into her vocabulary.) It seems it was a cold, wintry evening and their mother had had enough of the three of them in the tiny house and they had been sent to the barn where their father was doing chores. Up they went to the hayloft. She set the scene:

We could see Dad going from stall to stall, two horses to a stall, filling up the mangers with hay. We decided to scare the horses by dropping little stones at them. How do kids think of these things and where we got the stones from I can’t say. Elwood always had stuff in his pockets. One horse in his excitement, from the stones, stepped on Dad’s foot. When Dad caught us he grabbed a leather strap and laced our legs. I was the only one who had black and blue marks because I had on a dress. I didn’t own pants or jeans, no girl did.
This anecdote provided discussion on nature and fashion.

Mom’s parents had instilled in their children love and respect for nature and animals. They were taught to care for all things that could not care for themselves. Throwing small stones at animals was not tolerated. This was certainly a part of my upbringing as well. My dad always took care of the barn animals before he himself ate. Our pets were never abused; it would not be tolerated.

Clothing is a trope in feminist theory with two approaches – the body and social class. Women started wearing their husbands’ or men’s pants during World War I out of necessity as they assumed the places in the work force of men gone to battle (Hammond, 2009). Mom could not remember when she got her first pair of pants, “I wish that I could [remember] but it probably wasn’t until Normal School.” The second reference to social class suggests that women wore pants out of necessity, meaning they were required to work outside the home (Hammond, 2009). Mom made it very clear to me that she never saw her “mother in pants and that she never worked outside the home.” Mom, however, assured me that she was always warm but that she, as a child, “hardly had any clothes, none of the kids did.” It would seem that she was adequately but not lavishly dressed.

This session about her childhood and her parents ended somehow with Mom needing to express her views on child rearing today. It was interesting as she required no time to think about this topic; it was almost as though she expected to give her views, or certainly, wanted to. She recognized that children today are raised under entirely different circumstances than in her day. She started in and never came up for breath:

Mothers are in the work force, and too many children come home from school, etc. to empty homes. City children don’t have many chores to do – not like farm
children, so have idle time. That’s not good. Or else they are so programmed they
don’t know how to entertain themselves. Parents try to compensate for not
spending more time with their children by buying the children things, sometimes
things the child might not even ask for. Many preschoolers and children spend
their days with a sitter or in day programs which can’t help but affect their lives
whether good or bad, I won’t say. (Breath!)

The tone and inflection in her voice, however, were a clear indication that she felt that
this experience for children was not positive.

Ever the devil’s advocate, I had to ask her about her return to teaching and leaving
me at home with my Dad and my Gramps when I was very young. The immediate reply
was, “We had no money and there was a job and it didn’t kill you.” Interesting, her
justification, and she’s right on all counts, there was no money, there was a job and it
certainly did not kill me. In fact, it was a wonderful part of my life! But as I give this a
feminist reading I cannot help but wonder why one story was neutralized, almost made
invisible, and another subject to censure? I wish that I could ask her if she felt that her
return to the workforce was acceptable because of time, the early l950’s, place, our farm
and/or available related caregivers, my Dad and my Grandpa. Or were there any such
thoughts and discussion? I think not. Money was tight, the job was there and Mom went
to work and that was that. I do know that other than the telephone operator and my aunt
who worked with my uncle in their General Store, Mom was the only other woman who
worked out of the home or off the farm.

History repeats itself. I had often said in that ‘not me, never voice’ that when we
had children I would stay home with them as I had taught so many students of working
parents when I taught in Regina. Just like Mom, a member of the local School Board approached me after we moved to the farm and said that if a teacher could not be found the near-by one-room school would be closed. To make a long story short I went back teaching for the same reasons that Mom did – the job was there, money was tight and my husband became the main care-giver. I, too, was nearly the only woman working off the farm in our community in 1981.

I think of this woman, the mother who raised me, when she was a child. Her stories tell me that, like all children, we are shaped by our past. We are molded in part by childhood experiences, family order, and parents. I came to better understand Mom, to better appreciate who she became, because of where she came from.

As a child, Mom said, “After school and weekends and holidays sometimes were really lonely, with only my brothers to play with – the occasional visit with neighbours. Maybe I should have said isolated instead of lonely because I don’t remember feeling lonely as I didn’t know anything different. We always found ways to put in the time.” Another reason Mom said she wasn’t lonely was because “she was expected to help with all of the chores, and that kept me busy.” School also occupied much of her time.

Mom said one of her greatest joys, as a child, was when she started school. “I loved school, all of it.”
“…I remember overhearing Dad and Mom telling people that I liked to study. They would say that she’s always doing homework. I did love to study and learn, still do…”

Who Was This Student?

Mom was a student during ‘Hard Times’ or ‘The Thirties,’ as she referred to them in conversation and discussion of this period in her life, and in the history of the area that she grew up in. As a child I remember many a reference, from Mom, to something that had happened or was a result of Mom having lived through ‘Hard Times’. She seldom used the words ‘The Depression’ or ‘The Dirty Thirties’ in conversation, but usually
these were the expressions that she used for my data gathering; she used these words when she was in teaching mode. She considered my data gathering hours to be more formal in some way and often used different expressions than would be a part of her normal vocabulary. Mom used formal wording for certain descriptions of events, I think for emphasis, or perhaps to create, in her mind, more credence for her observations. David Crystal addresses this saying:

Human beings are not static. Their thinking, choice, and behavior vary according to need and situation. As they adapt their behavior according to the situation, they adapt their language. This adaptation of language according to situation, context and purpose forms a language variety that is called ‘Register’.

He adds that “Idiolect refers to the Linguistic system of an individual – one’s personal dialect” (Crystal, 2009, p.76). Mom’s expressive language differed from her idiolectic language and for the purpose of this study, in our discussion of ‘Hard Times’, she most often used more formal referents.

For her, her memory of that particular decade in the last century was one of hard times and hard times they were, indeed. She would spend most of ‘The Thirties’ as a student. She said that we could not “talk of her education without talking about ‘The Thirties’. ” They were interwoven inextricably.

On the first day that we talked about ‘The Thirties’, setting the scene for her school experiences, I had taken two sources for us to read and study. The first, The Dummer and area history book, *Their History: Our Heritage* (1982), edited by Mom, is one of many local histories written around the time of Saskatchewan’s 75th birthday. Mom became the editor, assuming a role where official historians are traditionally male.
(Judith Butler, 1990). She possessed a complicated identity at the time as she balanced both home and family. She was born, had lived and taught in the Dummer Community. She was probably chosen by her peers, for editor, because she was seen as a person fully engaged in the world with a scholarly bent for history and story. There would, of course, be gaps and absences, the book would not be perfect but she was bent on storying the community, combining it with the emerging settler story. With her driving intellect she was recognized by the community because of her august ability; she was respected and impressive in her desire both to create the local history and to ascertain its veracity to the best of her editorial ability. She did her best.

Mom’s history book uses rather clinical wording to describe this nearly apocalyptic time in local history:

The stock market crash in 1929 caused the already low prices to drop even lower. Jobs were scarce and wages were low; unemployment was widespread. The depression had begun. The drought which struck our area during the thirties merely added to the distress. (p.18)

As we read the article together she would pause and look out her window. I could tell that she was thinking but she said nothing and I did not push her. We moved on.

The second source we used that day was *Our Canada: A Social and Political History*, (Francis & Riddoch, 1985), the Grade Twelve history text, presently approved for use in Saskatchewan. It defines The Great Depression as “the period of economic depression, marked by a severe decline of business activity that began in 1929 and lasted through most of the 1930’s” (p. 184). Mom liked that my second source was a “school history text” seeming to give it slightly more credibility than the history book that she
herself had edited. She did point out, however, that the Dummer history book, the
definitive referent for the entire community, ‘her book’, as we all referred to, was
“accurate as well”. This inability to take credit for the accuracy and accomplishment of
her efforts demonstrates what is commonly referred to as ‘the imposter syndrome’ mostly
in Feminist theory (Clance & Imes, 1978). Mom’s history book was good but not quite as
good as the textbook, according to her.

When I read this second definition to Mom she looked thoughtful, just for a
moment, and then said with a contemplative tone in her voice, “It wasn’t history when I
was a child, I didn’t study it. They were hard times. I lived them.” I believe that she
meant that because she experienced the Great Depression first hand it wasn’t yet
historical, an époque captured for all time in historical writing. I wish I could have a
conversation with her about social and economic history often overlapping. Would she
view political economic history as male making it more legitimate and social history, the
history of ordinary people, as female and perhaps less legitimate (Boursay, 2006)? I will
never have this conversation with her. Mom and her family, not only lived ‘Hard Times’,
they survived them and she shared their stories of those times. We grew up hearing these
stories from our parents, and they affected how we, their children, viewed our world.

For me, the most poignant definition of that time in history, in Mom’s history, of
those years that forever changed the ways that the survivors viewed their world and the
ways that they lived the rest of their lives, are not the words of an approved history text
nor the words of a published community history book, but the words of my mother:

We grew up in the years of the Depression. During those years of our schooling
and teens our family experienced ten years (the Dirty Thirties), with virtually
little or no cash. Farming was hit very hard. A series of crop failures over the 10 years resulted from the following: grass hopper invasion, army worm invasion, hail storms, drought, so no or very little grain was sold. In 1929 came the Stock Market crash followed by ten years of low prices. These ten years were the Depression years. Our eggs sold for ten cents a dozen but they helped pay for groceries, the few we bought, such as sugar and salt. The ways our folks and some other farmers in particular managed to survive were: raised cattle, poultry, and pigs. We planted gardens, hauled wheat to the mill for flour and grits and so we always had the basics. Hard work was involved in our garden because we spent the evenings hauling water to put on the rows of vegetables by pail. Only one year there were absolutely no vegetables. That was in 1937, the year the army worms (little inch-long green things) literally marched west in mass formation and ate, yes, literally stripped anything edible: plants, grains, vegetables, fruit, shrubs, even the Russian thistles. On their journey I remember them crawling in a green mass up the wall and over the top of the house, eating what little paint there was and where they ended up, I don’t know. Fresh fruit, other than rhubarb and gooseberries, was hard to get. However, every fall we did get cases of fresh plums, peaches and pears from a traveling Jew who came with a loaded truck of fruit and exchanged it for the year old hens. Of course, Mother then canned the fruit as we had no freezers. At times Dad was able to supplement his meager income in crop failures with labour like taking four horses and a fregon, a big scoop, and helping maintain the dirt roads, the only kind we had. Payment for this work was a credit at the Municipal Office for his
land taxes. However, in 1937, the year of absolutely no crop, our family did go on Relief – a small cheque from the government. Other aids were shipments of clothing and food which came in by boxcars on the railway that same year. I remember maple syrup and apples arriving just before Christmas one year from Mom’s relatives back East. What a gift! Despite the Great Depression years our family did not go hungry as can be seen by the good management of our parents of the resources which they had.

This synopsis expresses well that Mom and her family did, indeed, ‘live’ the Thirties. When I asked her how much it affected her life she was quick to reply that her family’s “struggle to exist,” along with their neighbours and hundreds of others, had taught her many things. She learned that “money didn’t grow on trees” (words I certainly heard as a child as well!). She finished by saying that she “learned to not want things that I could get along without. ‘Hard Times’ also taught us not to waste a thing.” And Mom, like so many who lived through those years, never wasted anything.

She never threw out leftover food, it was saved and eaten until what was left went in the soup pot or finally to the dog or the chickens; she cut the zippers and buttons from worn out clothes (one of my prized possessions is her Button Jar), the clothes then were used for patching or put in the rag bag; she saved the tissue wrappers on the Christmas oranges and other fruit and strung them together for use in the outhouse; she saved every scrap of paper, every envelope, every piece of string, bread bag tag, plastic bag and strawberry basket…you get the picture. There is a connection between her saving and our editing process. After all, she and I created together a process of construction. This study is a partial understanding of a person - what image became our basic unit of
measure to decide what we should keep and what pieces of information we should
discard? Was Mom parsimonious or was she simply a good steward? And which was I?

After a good session I would go home and type up my notes ready to take back to
her for ‘correcting’ because that is exactly what she did. She did not edit, she took her
red pen and corrected our notes. She would often phone with some additions or
corrections for me to add and the next time that we met they would be written down
carefully on the back sheet from her empty cheque book, on a used envelope or some
other paper she had saved. She was no different than many of that generation but because
she was our Mom we always found it interesting, and sometimes a little frightening,
when we would stop in and she would invite us for supper saying, “I’m sure there’s
something in the fridge that we can warm up!” We couldn’t help but wonder just exactly
how long the ‘something’ might have been there.

She recalls her mother’s great excitement over the purchase of a dress, hat, gloves
and shoes because “hats and gloves were a must when women dressed up. It must have
been one of our very rare trips to the city because she bought them all at the Army and
Navy, probably all for less than 10 dollars, too.” She remembered clearly that it was the
first new purchase for her Mother in three years. Mom said that her mother also made all
of her dresses (remember, no pants) adding, “Not that I had many, and one was always
saved for Sunday School and Church. I was really excited if Mom was able to get one
made for our school Christmas concert – the biggest event of our school year.” This
discussion led smoothly into discussion of the weather.

After Mom moved to Avonlea, Saskatchewan one of her first questions when the
snow flew that fall was had we teachers started to practise for the school Christmas
concert, followed immediately by, “It is a Christmas concert and not one of those ‘winter’
concerts they have to have in the city?” Then in the next breath, of course, she
commented, “I do hope the weather holds for the concert.” Ah, the weather!

The weather is a constant topic of discussion here in Saskatchewan but it was
never more so than during ‘The Thirties’. Mom said her memories of that time were
“cold winters and dusty, dirty summers. They weren’t called the Dirty Thirties for no
good reason.” She recalls her mother wetting old sheets and hanging them over their
windows to keep the dust from getting in:

The room would be dark, like early evening, all day as Mother struggled to keep
the place clean. Sometimes the wind would blow like that for days. Dad would
come in, more like blow in, from the barn. The ditch dirt was like sand and it was
everywhere. Most of the best land just blew away somewhere; fence lines would
be walls of blow dirt and tumble weeds. Things were brown, not much green to
fill in. It was dirty, dry and ever so dusty. I was little and didn’t have a family
to feed. I’m sure Dad spent a good part of his days just looking up, hoping to see
a wet cloud coming, hoping for rain.

Mom’s description of those dusty days parallels the imagery of Sinclair Ross (1968), the
Saskatchewan author, when he writes of the challenges of prairie life, battling the
weather during the Depression. “A little before noon she lit the lamp… [The] dust was
thickening to an impenetrable fog” (p. 7). Both descriptions, one from a published author,
the other from the recollection of a ninety year old woman, paint equally vivid pictures of
that dismal time in Saskatchewan history.
This then, is the era and circumstance in which Mom was educated. She was a product of ‘Hard Times’. This historical pocket of time and Mom’s experiences as she lived through it would be a part of her forever, affecting every facet of her life. She would always be a saver; she would always be appreciative of that time in her life when she had so little, when she and the rest of her world learned ‘to make do’. I think that is why, when she and Dad had a little money later in life, they travelled the world over but never had to have ‘the big house’; she decided (trust me, she did the deciding) what was important. More than this though, Mom became a lifelong learner, always seeking to know more and to understand better, and a lifelong teacher. This quest for knowledge began with a horse and buggy ride to a tiny one-room school up the dirt road and it never ended. She learned to play Tile Rummy at the age of ninety and then taught the game to anyone wishing to learn (and to some who perhaps did not).

**School Days**

Mom’s memories of these first years at school were: the buggy ride to school; being able to write her name in the dust on her desk most mornings; recesses playing games of tag or “watching the boys snare gophers”; horses “screaming” to get out of the barn when there was a storm coming; boys teasing girls “but not me”; lard pails for lunch pails but she couldn’t recall exactly what was in them, “bread and something I guess, I was never hungry”;

![Figure 7: Barney, the horse, arrives at Maple Slope School with Ron (left), a friend and Doreen. Circa 1925](image)
leaving their coats on until the room heated up enough to take them off; mitts on the stove in winter “sometimes left too long and we could smell them burning”; and lots of homework, which she loved. She loved school, loved learning and she loved being with other children remembering “always having friends and someone to play with. My friends from Grade One to Grade Twelve consisted of the three or four girls that were with me in each of the grades, all those years.” She remained close friends with one of those little girls her entire life.

She remembers being shy. She never was one to seek attention, especially when she first started school recollecting, “one of the older students, perhaps 12 or 14 repeatedly asking me, ‘Did the cat get your tongue?’ when I wouldn’t tell her my name on the first day of school.” Mom didn’t know why she wouldn’t tell the older girl her name. “Maybe because she kept asking me, I can get my back up, you know!” Oh, really! She also did not think that that was bullying. “But there were bullies, just the same as now and just like then, they think they run the show. I can’t stand a bully, never could and didn’t put up with it in my classroom.” Mom never did have patience for bullying and always was for the underdog; this was who she was, both at school and how we were raised at home.

Her early years at school were happy but she did not find them particularly easy. When she told me this, I was surprised because I always thought that she found learning easy; I should say that was my assumption. Mom said that her early education in a one-room school taught her many life lessons, the most important one “to work on my own and figure things out.” There were 35 to 45 students in that one room so students were left to read on their own and do assignments:
We learned a lot of our lessons by listening to the teacher teaching classes beyond our level. By the time we got to those same lessons we already knew the material. Needless to say, we always had homework with only our text books for help – no films, no computers, no public library to go to. But with hard work we learned or we wouldn’t have passed the Grade VIII Departmental exams. I remember overhearing Dad and Mom telling people that I liked to study. She’s always doing homework. Incidentally, maybe always studying paid off as I did write the Government Grade VIII Departmental exams when I was 12 years old and passed. There was an obvious tone of pride in her voice at this accomplishment.

She also recalled how proud she was that, although their school was small, Mr. Dyer, her first and most influential teacher, had prepared his students for the track events for competition at neighbouring Field Meets. The following excerpt from an article from *Their History: Our Heritage* (1982), shows not only that the students were well prepared but that Mom was already, at the age of twelve, a competitive athlete. She read aloud to me, “Although unable to win against the village schools at ball, Maple Slope School won the day at Truax Field Meet, October 9, 1931, making all their points in track and field events. Doreen Nesbitt, Edward Ardelyan, Jean Lewis and Gertie Dykstra, in that order, topped the scoring for Maple Slope” (p. 71). There was great pride in her voice, and a tear in my eye, as she read the results of the Truax Track Meet. This is one more example of the remarkable intertextual quality of this research; Mom and I reading texts together, re-reading texts of her life, discussing them and then me writing about it.

Up to the age of fourteen Mom said she had few recollections of school. She remembers trying to please the girls by “trying to fit in”. When I commented that I found
it interesting that she would “try to fit in” she hotly replied, “Well, I was a teenager!” She also “kind of avoided the boys”; although one boy managed to get her to take a stick of gum from him. “He thought he was my boyfriend, and I think I rather liked him, too!” Her social life was very limited; there was no money and her parents had little time for much other than running the farm. Going to Sunday School and church on Sundays, an odd school dance, visiting with neighbours and heading to town some Saturday evenings summed it up. “I remember being excited when Mother allowed me to go to a couple of school dances, accompanied by my brothers and father. I was upset because Mom wouldn’t get me high heels, like some of the girls wore to dances. We couldn’t afford them.” When I asked her why her Mother didn’t go to the dances Mom said she thought she might have stayed home to “be alone in the house, by herself.” I am reminded of Virginia Woolf’s (1929) *A Room of One’s Own* and although I don’t think that her Mother stayed home to write (though I have no way of knowing this), the intimation by my mother of this behaviour of her mother was that this time of solitude in that tiny house was precious to her.

Typical of that period in the history of education here on the prairies (according to Mom) she and her friend spent two years at the ages of 14 and 15 at home taking their Grade XI by correspondence. The girls would discuss their lessons, perhaps by phone or when they were able to get together. There was no room for them at the nearby school and Mom wasn’t even sure if there were two extra desks. Had there been room and, perhaps, desks they:

could have attended, but in body only as the teacher would not have had time to help us if needed. You see the school was crowded. It was especially so after
harvest, as boys able to help with the harvest did so and returned to school in late September. Some years the enrolment would reach 45 - 48 pupils, Yes, and only one teacher. No [Teacher] Aids. No preparation periods. No nothing.

She commented often on the use of Teacher Assistants in present day schools and how useful they would have been in the one-room schools.

When I asked Mom what, if anything, she would change about her schooling, she very stoically replied, “Change was not possible under the circumstances. There was no money. We all did the best that we could with what we had, and I was a child, and I really didn’t know any different at the time. I was happy. One thing that I would not change was having Mr. Dyer as a teacher.” We devoted a lot of time to Mr. Dyer, her childhood teacher, in our data collecting.

Mom actually wrote the following detailed and vivid recollection in her later years of Mr. Dyer and it speaks to the tremendous impact that he had on her as a young student and as a person:

The former students at Maple Slope School were very fortunate to have had Mr. Urcyle Dyer for their teacher for nearly four years (usually the teachers only stayed a year or two). Doreen and her brothers were among the fortunate ones. Mr. Dyer taught at the Maple Slope S.D. #3840 in 1928, the first few months of 1929 and all of 1930 and 1931.

Mr. Dyer was very instrumental in molding the character of the youngsters he taught. As well as the academic lessons, inter-school activities were brought about – ball games and Sports Days. The schools we played ball against were approximately 6 – 8 miles away. He began a non-denominational Sunday school, and he was the
superintendent. Children came from all directions. One Rally Sunday over 125 boys, girls and adults were in attendance.

We learned how to plant gardens. We also learned how to conduct meetings, keep minutes and records, and how to handle small amounts of cash when our “Busy Bee Club” was formed. Our health was improved by being taught the Red Cross health rules re: sleep, nutrition and exercise. To help us remember the rules we checked our individual daily records on charts.

Our morals improved (at least they should have) while Mr. Dyer was with us. He got to our subconscious minds by charts and mottos (always a motto on the front board), for example, play fair and never cheat; do not take the other’s possessions; be kind to animals. To strive to succeed the motto was: If at first you don’t succeed try, try and try again. (She said the mottos “stuck in our heads, like Nursery Rhymes”)

Mr. Dyer was an accomplished pianist but our school had no piano. However, it did have a pump organ, which he played for our songs and hymns and taught us many of each. The organ came in handy especially on “dust storm days”! We had no lights, only one oil lamp, which Mr. Dyer placed on the organ, and he played the music and we sang until the dust blew over.

Last but not least he taught us the following school “yell” for use at ball games and Field Meets, in particular:

One, two, three, four, who are we for?
We’re for the red; we’re for the white
We’re for the ones that do what’s right!
For Maple Slope School
M-A-P-L-E S-L-O-P-E Maple Slope!
We had a red and white ribbon (each 6 inches long) that we proudly wore for our ball games and Field Meets.

Mr. Dyer was truly a remarkable man.

The detail in her recollections of this teacher, nearly seventy years after the fact, speaks directly to Mom’s admiration for this man and his influence on her. Mom cleared her throat during one of our many school days sessions and quietly, but with conviction, chanted her school ‘yell’; I could hear the echo of the students’ voices and I could visualize Mom, with her red and white ribbon flapping in the prairie breeze, as she cheered on her classmates. There was no doubt as to the influence of Mr. Dyer.

Was Mr. Dyer a student of John Dewey? I cannot know, but his philosophy of experiential learning as advocated by Dewey during this period is significant.

Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of the inter-connectedness between education and experience, …all that the students’ encounter in their school context, as well as all that occurs in their school, home, and neighbourhood, as experience with the potential to contribute to their learning…[T]his broad base of potentially-influential interactions highlights the power of schooling experiences, and further reinforces the importance of recognizing and celebrating the diversity that students bring to a school context (Flinders and Thorton, 1998, p. 350).

Mr. Dyer seemed, from Mom’s and my discussion of her educational experiences under his tutelage, to encompass Dewey’s philosophy, perhaps by instinct as opposed to scholarly study.

Mom said that Mr. Dyer had nearly as much influence on her as did her parents, affecting not just her education, but also her emotional, physical and spiritual well-being.
He proved to be her mentor in life and in her career. She also carried a lot of ‘Mr. Dyerisms’ with her as she left her one-room school to further her education in the big city.

**The Move**

At the age of sixteen there was a big change in Mom’s life. Several crop failures forced many farmers to supplement their incomes and so the family moved to Regina where her father managed a second grade hotel near the railway station. Mom said that this move was “pivotal” in her life and had they not gone to the city that winter she “could not say exactly how her life may have turned out.” That move not only allowed Mom opportunity to complete her high school education but it also provided her with something of equal importance to her. She became a part of a social circle of teenaged “city girls who were feeling the hard times, known as the Depression, just like we were.” I asked Mom why this seemed so important to her, this revelation of hard times being felt by “city people” and after some thinking she said that up until the move she simply only thought of how the hard times had affected her “little world and the people in it.” Mom’s recollections of the move are diverse in nature but surely indicative of the era and her age.

This move to nearby Regina allowed Mom to become socially active with young people, especially girls her age. She was able to join a girls’ group through Knox-Metropolitan church. Meetings were held periodically in their homes which she noted “were really big in comparison to our farm home. The leader of our group got me out of my shell (I was still really shy when I joined them) and soon I felt a part of them.” One of her mother’s main concerns she added “was me not having proper clothes (being short
of money) but I was able to get a skirt and sweater which made me part of the group, as they wore the same skirts and sweaters, too, over and over again.” Mom could clearly remember the colour of her sweater which was “yellow, not like the sun, more like mustard.” Surely, the sweater represented more than just a special article of clothing but also was a symbol of her growing up in the big city as well; once again the trope of clothing a metaphor for her place in this new world and her acceptance into it (Hammond, 2009).

She finished her Grade XI by correspondence that winter while in Regina. She “just did it and mailed it and that was it.” The family returned to the farm in the spring to put in the crop, and she recalled, “things were no better and Dad was able to get the same job, we moved back to the city in the fall, and that was when my life really changed.” When queried as to why she said, “Because that was when my life really changed. That was the year that I got my Grade XII, a real accomplishment at that time.” Education was always of paramount importance to Mom; at no time in my life did I ever hear the words “you will go to university and get a degree.” However, I knew that this was the assumption and therefore, the expectation.

Mom did indeed ‘get her Grade XII’ that year but not without some adversity. She enrolled in Balfour Technical School. I cannot imagine that shy country girl on her first day at that huge school. She said after she figured out where she was going and found her way to her first class she realized that “my whole school would have fit into the classroom that I was sitting in. I just couldn’t get over it.” What a disappointment Mom got when “the principal, G.R. Dolan said that I couldn’t take full Grade XII because I hadn’t my Grade XI Algebra mark. I said, ‘But I know my Grade XI Algebra, I just
didn’t get a chance to write it in June because I had the mumps’.” She was allowed to take Grade XII but had to attend Grade XI Algebra classes while taking History on her own. She said it was through sheer hard work that, “The following June, I received my Grade XII certificate having written exams on the Algebra XI and History XII inclusive.” The country girl had done well.

I wish that I had taken more photos of us working on my paper; I wish I had the opportunity to do a lot of things, but Mom is gone. I cannot. I am, however, positive that no camera could have captured the look of pure pride, of absolute satisfaction on her face, as she told me of this accomplishment.

Of course Mom knew her Grade XI Algebra and the following anecdote tells why:

Mom and Dad had gone back to the farm in the spring and I was left to board with a family to finish the year. The lady had asked me to go with them on a holiday but I knew that if I could just have some time to myself that I could figure out the Algebra and so they left me for the weekend. I started at the beginning of the text and I worked my way through the chapters and did the examples and by the time they got home on Sunday night I knew my Algebra. I got it. I’m not sure that I ate anything but I knew my

Figure 8: Mom, Grade XII, on the steps of Balfour Collegiate, Regina.
Algebra and that’s why it made me mad when I had to take it again in Grade XII but it really didn’t matter because I knew it.

And that was how Mom did things. She said, “You just worked at something until you got it and if you did that, you would never forget it.” This tenacity, this unwillingness to simply get by; this quest for understanding (not just knowledge) was who this student was, the teacher this student would become.

It is important to note the shirt and tie in Figure 8, in what she said she supposed was her “grad picture – no fancy show in those days.” She had attended all of our children’s Grade XII Graduations and in most small towns in Saskatchewan these are ‘fancy shows’. All fashion, in some way, is representative of its place in history, a historical snapshot. In this picture we see the masculine shirt and tie accompanied by the skirt – emblematic of the blurring of the gender line. This pre-World War II trend became popular as women entered the previously male domains in the workplace (Hammond, 2009). She thought that she “looked sharp” in this picture. Mom always liked to look sharp and dressed as well as she could with her resources.

“So, Mom, you got your Grade XII, not without a struggle, now what?” Common jobs, for women at the time, included nurse, typist, secretary, telephonist and other such domestic type employment including teaching (Collins, 2003). When I asked if she felt that teaching was her calling (Bullough, 2008) she pondered the question, flashed that twinkle of the blue eyes and said that the next step in her education was “kind of a funny story.”
Maybe It Was Because Dad Sold the Cows

The following exchange is how “the funny story” unfolded:

I went into teaching. Mother was very helpful in trying to get me an education. At that time girls’ opportunities lay in nursing, teaching or stenography. (Not unlike what I thought my own choices were 30 years later!) Teaching was my first choice and I’m not sure why. Had I thought about how hard it would be to find a job, I may have chosen differently – it’s not like I had dreamed of being nothing else but a teacher.

This is significant as it is congruent with the framework of this study of Mom’s experiences leading up to her becoming a teacher – what was the deciding factor in the decision to enter the field of education?

“Do you think that your becoming a teacher happened for a reason, Mom – was there some divine purpose?”

“No”, and after a long pause, with a twinkle in her eye, she exclaimed, “Maybe it was because Dad sold the cows!”

There was no money, of course, and tuition for Normal School, (the nearest institution for teacher training at the time, so called because these schools were established to provide instruction in the “norms” of school instruction) was a problem. She began the story, “Dad solved it by loading up five head of cattle and Mother and me in the truck, and off to Regina we went.” Apparently, in 1937, the going price for five head of cattle was $75.00, the same price as tuition for one year of Normal School. The discussion from the stockyards to the school must have been interesting as she continued, “the money was needed for other things than my tuition. Dad said he would make them
an offer.” And he did - $25.00 at the time, with the understanding that the balance would be paid after Mom completed her first year of teaching. The offer was accepted. She did not, rather could not, pay the rest of her tuition for several years as she didn’t get paid all of what she was owed in salary; these were ‘Hard Times’. This bartering for an education is a social commentary on life during the Depression. There was mention in two of the memoirs that I read of wheat being sold to cover expenses and such, but of all that I read only Mom paid her tuition with cattle money.

And so the professional fate, the direction of her life, and, indeed, Mom’s life work were determined by her mother and the sale of five cows. We had a good laugh the day that we went over our notes and I pointed this out to her. Her only comment was, “And it all turned out very well, didn’t it?” It certainly did. And off she went to Normal School in Regina, the nearest institution for teacher training at that time.

Normal School for Mom was a time of anticipation and excitement. Everything was new but I could tell that she was eager by the way she talked about it. She also had some clear remembrances of her first day. Her blue eyes flashed and she recalled that:

Normal School was a ten month course in teaching and every part of it was new and tough for me, and I started late, because of the money, so I felt I had to work harder than the rest. We were exposed to a variety of teachers like Mr. Griffin, the Language teacher, (I was amazed at her recall of teachers’ names and other specifics about her training. I would be hard pressed to remember more than one or two professors’ names from my teacher training. I wonder why.) who, on my first day, commanded me to, ‘Stand, Miss Nesbitt, stand!’ (This example of patriarchy compares to that of Gloria Mehlmann (2008), a young First Nations
teaching candidate, who on her first day of Normal School, clearly heard a professor snidely comment, “Who said anyone can teach?” (p. 40). So I stood, petrified and then he gave me a big long sentence, ‘The big, fat dog ran down the road by the granary’ or something like that, I can’t remember but I do remember it was about a dog running. I was thunderstruck because I was new to the school and about three weeks behind, so I was feeling on the spot, and I just froze and I will always remember the guy across the row muttering the answers for me. The first question was, ‘What was the complete subject?’ and I didn’t know the difference between complete and incomplete but I could hear Larry and, I’m sure Mr. Griffin (notice she still used Mr., respectfully, after all these years) could hear him too. Larry got me through it and when I was done Mr. Griffin commanded me to sit down and he never bothered with me again. I was so mad at him. And I never forgot it.”

This particular incident must have indeed been carved indelibly in her memory, as she had drawn her little body up straight when she told me the story, and I could almost hear Larry buzzing the answers to her from across the aisle.

When I asked her why she was so angry at Mr. Griffin, she said:

because he chose to embarrass me; a good teacher would never do that. Mr. Dyer would never do that! And like so many things his [Mr. Griffin’s] scare worked for me because I went out and bought the book Vitalized English, and between studying that book and asking those who seemed to know, I learned my language. I think that scare helped me get my grammar down, and I did know my English when I started to teach.
Mom’s use of the word language here refers to the grammatically correct use of the English language, both spoken and written. She learned this as she learned most things, often on her own and by not being afraid to ask others. This was important to her, that she be a model for her students. And she forever corrected any poor grammar, written or spoken, until the day she died!

There were interesting observations that came from this session. First, that she compared Mr. Dyer to Mr. Griffin, and Mr. Griffin came up short. Second, that she actually remembered the name of the book that she bought to learn grammar. Next, as previously observed with grammar, that she sought those that she knew could help her in the learning of what she felt she was weak in. Finally, that she learned it. I pointed my observations out to her and she saw nothing unusual in any of them merely commenting, “I knew when I needed to know something and I learned it.” That was the end of the discussion for that particular day.

As previously stated, Mom claimed never to have been exposed to any particular theorists at Normal School. I am sure that she was but perhaps they were never named explicitly or the theory was lost in the perceived need to learn “the basics.” No training, however, is theoretically neutral. John Dewey was unknown to her, as far as she could recall, “There wasn’t much pie in the sky stuff. There was no time. We were too busy learning the basics.” I love the inference that anything other than what she deemed important was ‘pie in the sky’! I was also interested in what the ‘basics’ might be.

The basics, according to Mom, proved to be that:

we learned a little bit about what we were going to be teaching, and not a lot about how we would teach it. Mr. Scarow, the geography teacher, taught us stuff
that we would be teaching in that course. Some others just sort of taught general stuff. We spent a lot of time making up day plans. I tried to do that when I first started teaching but I had too many grades and no time so I just filled the day with the subjects and I felt that was better. They didn’t teach us anything about discipline, they didn’t say if you have trouble, you will do this or do that. We just kind of flew by the seat of our pants. Normal School was an experience, it helped me mature, it opened up my world and I made some lifelong friends. I had my upbringing and Mr. Dyer to thank for what I really needed in the classroom.

It would seem that Mom didn’t think that Normal School really prepared her for her teaching career, but rather she credited her life experiences for most of her success, and Mr. Dyer for being her mentor. Her experiences were already socialized to align with the structure of school – gender and class.

I had thought that discussion of Mom’s teacher training would have taken more of our time, but she was content when she reviewed my notes and made few correction or additions, recalling thoughtfully, “They must have thought that I was ready to go because I got my certificate and that was it.” And so began her teaching career.
“Well, I never wanted to do anything else. I was always satisfied. I never regretted getting up in the morning and having to go to work. I just got up and looked forward to the day and hoped it went well.”

Who Was This Teacher?

The dawn of Mom’s teaching career, this eighteen-year-old prairie girl from Dummer, Saskatchewan, began in a one-room school very near to where she was born and raised. The professional sunset would be 24 years and one month total years of service later (the exact number being very important to Mom). During those 24.1 years she would teach in various educational settings, nearly one-half of them in one-room country schools, take various leaves to raise her four children, continually educating herself, and contributing to church and community. Her personal sunset would be at the age of 91 and a bit, after a lifetime of learning and teaching.

This recently graduated teenaged teacher, after writing out “twenty or so applications in long hand, no Xerox then” had received no replies. In July, at a local sports day in her home town, Mom was approached by the Chairman of the Board of a nearby country school to teach there. She accepted. Her career had begun, as she would say, “without an interview. I never did have an interview for any of my teaching jobs. They just seemed to come along at the right time. I was lucky.” She was always proud of this fact. I find it interesting that she looked at this as luck; somehow women think that they are lucky and men think they get what they deserve. This isn’t necessarily an intergenerational aspect; it is an interpretive understanding around gender constructs. Creswell addresses this saying, “Feminist Research also embraces many of the tenets of
postmodern and post-structuralist critiques as a challenge to the injustices of current society” (p.29). Mom and I did some cross generational feminist theorizing and after much discussion she wouldn’t let me change her words – in her mind, she was ‘lucky’. There was no injustice in her appraisal of her situation; it was simply fate.

Mom always used the word ‘country’ in conjunction with the descriptor ‘one-room’ because “there were one-room schools in Regina at that time, for Heaven’s sake, and those teachers didn’t have a clue what it was like to teach in one. They could order things they needed and they had playgrounds and probably sports equipment and they were close to street cars.” When we re-read this information as part of our editing and I asked her if she knew this for a fact, she became quite indignant and replied, “It’s the same as now, the city teachers have it easier than you do. They don’t have to ride the bus to Ogema [40 miles away] for a ball game; they can just go across town.” And there you have it, perhaps historically accurate, perhaps only nearly historically accurate, but that was Mom’s view of the differences between one-room school teachers and one-room ‘country’ school teachers! She was a one-room *country* school teacher.

Her first school was only eight and one-half miles from her farm home and as she said:

It may as well have been a hundred. I boarded with a family of nine children, shared a room with one of the oldest girls, a correspondence student of mine, actually only two years younger whose company I quite enjoyed. I got home the very odd weekend, when Dad or one of the boys could come for me, but I mostly worked. It was a lot of work but enjoyable.
Mom repeated, “It was hard work but most enjoyable” and then added, “and I didn’t know anything different”. It was important for her to make this point and she did, more than once.

Her days would begin early as she had a two mile walk from her boarding place to get to school; in winter the family she boarded with would take her, and the school aged children, by team and sleigh. Some mornings were even earlier, especially if she “had run out of daylight the day before and had to get the boardwork done before the bell.” I can visualize her, walking cross country to save time, with her bag of books on her shoulder, looking straight ahead and giving quick little puffs as was her way, almost a whistle but with no real sound, concentrating on the day ahead. She lugged this load for so many years that she eventually would have to have both shoulders replaced, “one because of the bookbag and the other because of the boardwork.” She assured me that most teachers of the day, “if they taught in the country” had similar ailments.

There were no electric lights, no running water, few, if any resources, no photocopier, and no other adult in the school. The Superintendent was supposed to appear

Figure 9: Oregon School, where Mom’s teaching career began.
periodically to assist or at least inspect but “he showed up right near the end of the school year and told me that everything looked good. (Loud snort) No thanks to him!” She, alone, was responsible for the education of the children in her charge and she took her duties very seriously.

“I would ring the bell at 9:00 sharp, unless the weather prevented it, and the children would get to their seats quickly and were quiet.” One of my prized possessions is Mom’s handbell. I never asked her how she came to possess it; she certainly wouldn’t have taken it, not my Mom, but I have it. The bell is an icon of that era, as typical as the solitary schoolhouse on the prairie; it was also a symbol of power with teachers beginning and ending their school days with the bell.

The bell rang and the children, after hanging their coats in the cloakroom with their jam pails neatly under their hooks, would “get to their desks, usually two hooked together or a row of six screwed to a board like a skinny sleigh”. The day would begin with the singing of ‘God Save the King’ and the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer as “we stood at attention, looked at the flag [the Union Jack] and [we] all sang.” I have no doubt that that is exactly how it happened. “The next order of the day,” she continued was that, “I read a Bible verse or two as well. And I did that every day until I retired.” Our discussion of the Lord’s Prayer and the Bible verse would provide enough fodder for another thesis; suffice to say Mom agreed that she would have trouble “running by the rules in schools now about stuff like that!” I recalled how pleased she was that Avonlea School had a Christmas Concert and not a Winter Concert.
She said that the days went by quickly:
as they do when you are so busy that you don’t know if you’re coming or going.
Well, I knew where I was going with the subjects, (note the use of the word
subjects, not curriculum) and those kids got there. They learned either from me or
from each other or by listening when I was teaching other grades. The boards
were full of notes and assignments with each group falling into a routine knowing
what was expected of them. I tried to dream up work that would challenge them,
make things interesting while they learned. I often thought of Mr. Dyer and what
he would have done.

Not once did she tell me that she drew on her teacher training from Normal School. I am
sure there must have been some educational influences from that training but they were
never specifically referred to by Mom in our data gathering. Also interesting is that, I too,
give little credit to my teacher training for my success as an educator, but rather to my
pre-teaching placements with exceptional mentors, Mrs. Sullivan and Mr. Lane and my
mother. My mentors allowed me to experiment and encouraged me to take over and
actually teach. But Mom kept me teaching – I was ready to quit the first week and
without her tips and tricks I surely would have. I also credit my early lived experiences
for my success as my parents offered me every opportunity available from piano and
dance lessons to art and drama classes; I did it all and I drew on those experiences often
in my teaching.

From our discussion I determined that she knew that innovation and allowing for
creativity would promote learning, easily done today with all of the available resources,
but a real challenge for a young teacher with few resources of any kind. Mom snorted and chuckled when I asked her about resources, and she said almost laughingly:

Resources! Resources! What resources? Once a month the Unit Office would drop off a box of books, usually not what I asked for. If there was a book on Constellations in the box, then that’s what we would learn, although I knew all of them. They would throw in some Literature books for the kids to read, too. Homes that had books would send them so other kids could read them and I always read to them all, right after dinner – a good book, like Robinson Crusoe.

She would never know the experience of teaching using what she would perceive as abundant resource material, never mind the Internet, but that did not prevent her from teaching using project-based learning like the school newspaper that she and her students created.

Because Mom took her role as ‘co-researcher’ very seriously, I now have her original ‘school newspaper’. (Figures 10 and 11) A former student Hugh, not quite five years her junior, lives in our community and would often visit Mom when she became a resident in the personal care home in Avonlea. Mom said she “would run things by Hugh to make sure what I’m telling you is accurate.” They would visit and after their visits she would edit her notes, thus my notes, and then she would give me the “go ahead to print it.” Hugh served as a member check, someone to reinforce the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Mom wanted things to be as accurate as she could. On one visit Hugh brought Mom the school newspaper that somehow he had managed to save all these years, one that he had helped to create. That’s how I came to know about ‘the school newspaper’.
The newspaper is an artifact that speaks volumes about the time and the place, both historically and educationally. The pages are yellow, the corners tattered, the ink has run in places and some of it is missing. Mom said that she thought that it took most of the year to complete, all seventeen handwritten pages, in pen and ink. It is a work of art, from the nearly identical perfect cursive writing from several ‘editors’, to the artwork itself. As Mom and I went through this creation her comments served as a wider window to that one-room country school and how she taught in that time and space. It is also a testament to the historical period as well. In the newspaper there was a poem, cut from another source, titled, “Don’t Be a Quitter”. She again referred to her mentor saying:

I think back to Mr. Dyer and I think one of his mottos was “Don’t Be a Quitter” and I talked about how important it is to never give up and finish things you start and always do your best with the kids. I suppose it was several Health lessons. I don’t remember it being part of the subject, it was usually health rules and how the body worked in those days.

She said that she knew this was important for the students to learn, and that “they must have got the message” if they cut out the poem and included it in the paper.

The section titled, “World News” was a difficult one for us to visit about because there were actual clippings from a real newspaper and each clipping dealt with prewar European politics. Remember, the year was 1938. Mom had no idea where the papers would have come from. She supposed that “one of the families got a weekly [newspaper] I guess.” The headlines, she said, “were a dark shadow of what was to come.” As she read them quietly aloud I could hear sadness in her voice, “Rumania Bows to Nazi Might, Netherlands Take War Precautions, Goering Pledges Firm Axis, German Income Tax
Boosted Again, Germans and Slovaks Sign Treaty, Spain Under Fascist Rule.” She paused and with a catch in her voice said:

I hadn’t even met Fred (my dad, who would serve in World War II as a liberator of the Netherlands) yet. We knew something was happening in Europe but we didn’t know what, no television, and so far away. I used the clippings to teach geography, not social studies really. I didn’t know much more than the kids. But we must have discussed it. We talked about World War I, I knew about it. Mr. Dyer taught us.

I found interesting the way she separated geography from what she called “social studies”, as if to say that it was the best that she could do under the circumstances and that she recognized some sort of social context existed in the curriculum of the day. Keep in mind that at this time there was no subject designated as ‘Social Studies’; there was Geography and History, but I still recognized in our discussion her awareness of the social part of war. It also became apparent that she really only knew about World War I and that was what she “talked about” with her students.

I wish that I had thought to read to her the following from the Saskatchewan Curriculum so we could have discussed it:

The purpose of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Social Studies is to help students know and appreciate the past, understand the present, influence the future, and make connections between events and issues of the past, the present, and the future. Further, its purpose is to make students aware that, just as contemporary events have been shaped by actions taken by people in the past, they have the opportunity to shape the future. The ultimate aim is for students who have a sense
of themselves as active participants and citizens in an inclusive, culturally diverse, interdependent world (Social Studies Aims and Goals, 2009).

I would like to think that she would have discussed the social aspects of war but I doubt it. I got the feeling that she was more concerned with the politics of her classroom and her community. I think she had neither the confidence nor the knowledgeable to discuss the politics of war. She became very defensive when I questioned her on Canada’s time of entry into World War II, again saying, “There was no television, little news of it and it wasn’t until some of them escaped [the Jews] that we started to believe it – we beat the Americans in.” The last said with pride. I left this whole discussion, thinking for another time. Sadly, I never got back to it.

We did discuss her role in the War. Her comment was that she “did what she could and what most women did – men’s jobs” (Canada Remembers Women on the Homefront, 2014). She went as a new bride with Dad to Ontario where he did his basic training. She did not teach there but matter of factly said, “because of my education I read blueprints for the making and assembly of rifles. I was good at it and it kept me busy.” Again, this seemingly casual reflection of her role in the War begged further discussion – another one we didn’t get back to.

I made the mistake of commenting that the art on the “Art Page” section looked like most of it had been traced. Mom took offence when I suggested this. I also told her that I thought this section looked more like a science section as the pictures were all of animals, birds or flowers. She thought about this and said that she thought she may have used the students’ pictures for science class as well as she had printed, “He stays all winter” under Richard’s picture of a Chickadee. She added, “They all knew their birds,
what they looked like, what their nests looked like and where they lived. Prairie flowers too.” This she said with a great source of pride. This knowledge of the prairies, learned from her parents, was also passed on to her children and grandchildren whenever the opportunity arose.

Figure 10: Richard’s Chickadee picture in the Art Section of the school newspaper.
The “Literary Section” could have created opportunity for a philosophical debate on educating but I decided I just wasn’t going there! With pride in her voice Mom said, “I picked the best stories, ones that were well-written and written well, if you know what I mean.” I purposefully didn’t inquire about the student’s story that perhaps was neither well-written nor written well but deserved equal representation – it didn’t seem to be the time or the place for this discussion. “Spring’s Child” and “The Underground Knights” were indeed “written well and well-written” and Mom was very proud of her students’ work as we read through them together.

This discussion, however, forced me to think of my own teaching. For example, at the start of my career I only submitted student work for the School Newspaper that was perfect. I felt that if it was going to be “published” that it would be a reflection of my teaching and so it should be perfect. I soon came to realize that this was not my teaching philosophy and was chastised for refusing to submit any student work at all, as I disagreed with the “perfect publication philosophy” of the school. Mom, however, disagreed with me.

We had a good laugh as we read the “Sports” section and Mom and I wondered how current the stats would have been considering how old the paper might have been that the articles were cut from. “The boys edited this section and look, nothing but ball and hockey. That’s okay, they knew I loved sports and they were interested in them, too. I played with them lots and taught them all the rules.” Sadly, the Toronto Maple Leafs lost out that year too.

We had the most fun with the “Local News” as it painted a unique social commentary of the time and place. I laughed right out loud at some of her comments.
For instance, commenting on the dance on Easter Monday she said, “Well, of course it was then because the damn Catholics didn’t dance during Lent, so no one did. And those Kirkpatricks could really play music.” She also enjoyed that she had made the news and she clearly remembered the day that school was late starting because she was late, saying “Ron (her brother) got stuck and the boys had to walk to pull us out and that Cecil, he was always tormenting Hazel. We had a lot of fun back then.” The newspaper not only served as a source of data but also provided us with a good laugh.
I asked Mom where she got the idea to have the students create the paper.

“Certainly not at Normal School”, was her instant reply. “I just thought things up that
might interest the kids and help them to learn. It’s what good teachers do. Mr. Dyer tried
to teach us about the world, as best that he could. I tried to do the same.” That Mr. Dyer
influence again. Her idea of creating the newspaper because it ‘might interest the kids
and help them learn’ is sometimes referred to as engagement (Lewis, 2007). I was
amazed by her humility at her seemingly innate ability to create the newspaper.

Have things changed in the classroom? Not really. Now that classroom newspaper
would be created with a computer, using snazzy graphics and the Internet, but the process
and the learning would be much the same. Was Mom an innovator in the classroom?
Not really; she would say that she was a survivor. Innovation for her was creating
learning situations using what few resources were available and drawing from her own
experience. She knew every bird, wildflower, weed and constellation. Her parents had
taught her well. She credited them by saying, “I thanked God my Mom taught me my
nature because I’m not sure what I would have done, with no books and such.” Her lived
experiences served her well.

Young ones would get help from older students and “there were few, really no
interruptions”. By this she meant that she had almost no discipline problems adding that
it was a “good thing too because I certainly learned nothing at Normal [School] to help
me out. I usually just did what Mr. Dyer did and that was quietly and with purpose. Kids
were different then, parents were strict and I think teachers were more respected.”

Britzman (2003) says:

We have all played a role opposite teachers for a large part of our school lives. It
is taken for granted that we all know what a teacher is and does. This knowledge
is based upon years of experience” (p. 3). But we can to further back than that, in
1970, Charles Silberman in *Crisis in the Classroom* observed that, “unless prospective teachers are given alternative pictures of what teaching and learning can be…They are almost bound to teach in the same way as their teachers taught them.” (p. 471-2)

Mom certainly taught the way that she was taught – Mr. Dyer was given nearly all of the credit for her teaching techniques and practices: her teacher training received almost no credit.

![Image](image-url)

*Figure 12: Mom’s observation of the lack of student discipline training at Normal School. Saskatchewan teachers may recognize the scrap of paper torn from the top of the STF Bulletin.*

Other than the usual classroom management issues, there were three times that she recalled vividly where further intervention was necessary. We had discussed these incidents at length during our ‘discipline’ session. I had made notes from the recording of that session. I thought we were done with discipline. However, at the beginning of our next session Mom handed me some papers. She had painstakingly written out her recollection of her methods of ‘discipline’ and said to me she done this so that I “could get it right.” The tone of her voice as she told me what she had done, the effort that she put into the writing of the incidents, and the stories themselves are worthy of their inclusion, in her words, in this narrative:
I’d like to write about a couple of incidents in my teaching career that could be of interest, especially looking back on how I handled them. It was my first day at Maple Slope School. I arrived early to tour the school and the grounds. It was a country school. I couldn’t believe the writing in pencil by the kids on the school, the barn and the toilets. There were hundreds of words and I wasn’t pleased.
What do I do, I wondered? When the kids arrived and when it was school time I rang the bell. After I held opening exercises and introduced myself I said, ‘Before we start work I must tell you I don’t like buildings with scribbling on them. I want you all to take your erasers (they all had new ones for the first day of school) and go out and don’t come back in until every word is erased. Out they went. I never saw kids so busy and so quiet. I think they were afraid of punishment and worked so fast. In a short time they had erased every word (even those in the rafters in the barn) and I called them back in. If I remember I think I told them the place looked civilized and in no way was there to be any more scribbling on the buildings. And there never was. But that problem [was] solved and never mentioned again. That was my form of discipline.

The second episode that curled my hair happened in the same school. It was the deliberate breaking of the boys’ cloakroom window by two bullying boys. I walked into my school one morning and half the kids were already there, and there was trouble. There was a window breaking noise in the boys’ cloakroom. I looked in and there were two boys, smart alecs, bullies, trying to put a boy, a poor timid one, through the window and it broke. They dropped him when they saw me and I yelled, ‘No bullying!’ and I rang the bell early. What do I do or say?
Well, they got a lecture on bullying. Then I said, ‘You who are responsible for breaking that window better get it fixed before I get to school tomorrow’. No more said.

The next morning I arrived and lo and behold, a new window was in place. And quiet kids! All day I said nothing. It kept them in suspense. I didn’t mention it ever again but there were no more antics like that. My quietness kept them in good order.

The third experience was my first day at Shackleton School. I started after Thanksgiving. I might have known there would be trouble in the middle of a term and when I went the first day I could tell that I was going to have trouble. I just didn’t like the atmosphere at all, it was just terrible. So when I went home to my boarding place my Landlady asked ‘How did you get along?’ and I said ‘I got along but I sure don’t like the atmosphere.’ She said, ‘Well they ran out the last teacher, so I expect they will run you out.’ So I decided I would be the boss.

So I went to school the next day and they were kidding around, this little group, and I didn’t like it, I couldn’t even start teaching so I went down and grabbed the one girl that I thought was the worst, the ring leader, pulled her out in the aisle, I shook her, and shook her, and shook her, and I said, ‘You may be here to drive me out but you are not going to drive me out, I am here to teach you and you are here to learn. ‘Sit down!’ and I shoved her back in her seat. So that was the end of that and I didn’t have to shake her or anyone during the year. I just did it on my own.
I did not type her handwritten account of these events for her to edit. I simply could not. Her teacher cursive handwriting seemed to create the visual for me far better than any mechanical printing could. When we discussed them again, we both agreed that these methods might not fly in today’s classrooms. She laughed and sarcastically said, “Oh, really. I’m sure the principal and the paperwork would be huge. And by the way, I shook that girl until her teeth rattled!” She was correct; these methods would not fly in today’s classrooms.

I got to thinking about discipline and discovered that Corporal Punishment was banned in 2005 in Saskatchewan schools. According to the Education Act students were required to submit to any discipline that would be exercised by a kind, firm and judicious parent (News Releases, n.d.). I never asked Mom if she ever strapped a student; I’m not sure why. Perhaps the ‘rattling of the teeth’ was enough for me to know! I did recall the only student that I had had strapped (thank goodness the principal executed the strapping as I doubt I could have!). It was not the punishment that I would have chosen but at the time it was the standard of the day for that particular infraction of the rule. And there was a lot of paperwork.

Recess time provided no respite because, as the only teacher, supervision was also part of Mom’s duties. She explained with a hint of derision in her voice:

I know many teachers in my situation would just let the kids run wild at recess and noon, not me. I played with the kids, actually taught them how to play games, like ball and Anti-I-over, and we would work on Field Meet things like learning how to Broad jump and High Jump, properly! I pitched for both teams and umpired, mostly because there weren’t enough kids for two teams. The
teacher before me must have decided that there weren’t enough to bother with. I taught them how to run, broadjump and high jump properly, using a rope because we didn’t have a proper stick to put between the two poles. And for a small school we got a lot of firsts and we competed well at the Field Meets.

She added, “I also taught them military exercises of some kind that we learned at Normal School.” I believe that this statement was the only time that I heard her give her teacher training at Normal School any credit for her teaching methods. I also found it interesting that it seemed that this reference was to something ‘military’.

Mom agreed with me that this type of personal interaction with students, getting to know them as children, not just students, contributed, not just to her success as an educator, but as well to her happiness in her chosen profession. She took a keen interest in them as people, not just as learners. “Teachers do more than teach. They foster social responsibility, broaden imaginations, and offer encouragement and support. The way a teacher perceives his or her job can directly impact any influence on students – academically, behaviorally, and emotionally” (GoodTherapy Blog, 2012). I was like Mom; I made every effort not to just teach my students but to take an interest in them as people, knowing their interests and skills, while encouraging them to be good citizens of the world. I had fun while I taught and so did Mom.

Reflection

When I look back over Mom’s stories and consider where she came from, her family life, her upbringing during ‘Hard Times’ as she called them, her education, her teacher training, her determination and her grit, I am truly amazed by her experiences. I
am amazed by this narrative of her early years. These lived experiences are what she, in her words:

brought to the table. I look at what you kids bring to your first teaching jobs now – travel, music lessons, playing on sports teams, roles on Student Council, university degrees – I brought my life on the farm, my life at my little country school with a very good teacher Mr. Dyer, how I had to learn much of my high school on my own, and my ten months of Normal School. I can’t believe any of us got jobs, let alone actually taught kids anything, but I did. One busy day at a time, I did it.

And that she did.

There would be several country schools that Mom would be the ‘marm’ of over the next years, including a stint at Maple Slope two miles from where she grew up, and the first school she attended as a student. Her experiences teaching in one-room country schools culminated with the closure of Dummer School, in 1958. She would not say that they were all the same because “they weren’t. Each school was a bit different and of course, the kids were different but I can’t say that much changed from school to school. I usually moved on to better myself.” For Mom this meant to larger schools, further away, and translated to more money for the job.
Figure 14: Doreen’s last teaching position in a one-room country school, Dummer, 1958. She made sure she was hidden behind the students so that her legs would not show. My sister and brother are in this picture, but not me. I only went days Dad and Grampa were busy.

If You’re Going to Teach, You Have to Learn

Mom would teach until 1980, her last years in urban schools. She would never stop learning because as she said, “If you’re going to teach, you have to learn.” She would complete her Bachelor of Education degree at the age of fifty-five, five years before she retired. I completed my degree that same year but because I followed the norm at the time of my marriage, taking my husband’s last name, I would cross the stage before her. And that gave Mom a real chuckle. She would take a variety of classes and courses the rest of her life, and she would keep on learning, things like Chip Rummy, until she was ninety years old.
Mom, My Mentor

As I said, she became my mentor when I began teaching. Perhaps the best advice she gave me (that sounds a lot like a’Mr. Dyerism’) was, “Don’t start yelling in September or you’ll yell all year. And plan so you know what you’re doing.” This was sound advice that served me well in my career.

Her teaching experiences certainly would not be considered unique; they would be similar to many of her peers of that era. However, I discovered a dearth of writing particular to the experiences leading to the initial teaching experience. This period in education, however, is unique, perhaps because of its historical situation in time, in the shadow of the Great Depression, and also perhaps because of its place, the prairies.

She seized every opportunity to teach something to someone. My life, our lives as her children, and the lives of her grand-children were filled with her life experiences. I never saw Mom read a novel, only the newspaper. When we got television (1958), Mom didn’t watch anything but the news and she never really did watch much, until she was older and had time, and then she got hooked on curling and watched the odd old movie. She gave each child and grandchild a bird book and taught them how they were used; walks were nature hikes identifying each plant and animal. And then there was the bird. Mom was helping us with our children during a busy time on the farm. They were all upstairs in a bedroom when a bird flew in the window and Mom, according to our eldest, “grabbed that bird right out of the air, held it in her hand and started to explain to us all of its various parts: how the wings worked, their tiny feet, the feel of the feathers and all about birds.” This was her way, her legacy of learning. Family vacations were Mom reading about our destination with us kids fighting in the back seat, dodging “the hand”
every once in a while. She took her students from Dummer School on a previously unheard of educational trip to Regina, visiting the Legislature, the Museum of Natural History and the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Mom truly was the quintessential educator.

**You Don’t Want to Live to be This Old**

One day, very shortly before she died, I had gone for my visit and I found her bent over the sink in her attached bathroom scrubbing her dentures, not easy work for those gnarled fingers. She sensed my presence, straightened a bit, caught my eye in the reflection of the mirror and said, “Sis, you don’t want to live to be this old.” It was a rare statement of her tiredness with living, of her body failing her. I am reminded of Carolyn Heilbrun (1988); she was ready to end her own life and she did. Mom, however, was simply ready for her life to end, and it did very soon after that day. She will forever live, with my dad, in a hole in my heart. W. H. Auden’s poem “Stop all the clocks” says it best for me:

> Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone
> Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
> Silence the pianos, and with muffled drum
> Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come…
> [S]he was my North, my South, My East and West,
> My working week and my Sunday rest,
> My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
> I thought that love would last for ever; I was wrong.

The love lives on but Mom is gone. What a gift we gave to each other, this study of her experiences leading to her becoming a teacher.
Chapter 5: Reflection

Analyzing Narrative Inquiry

Potgieter and Smit (2009) suggest that narrative inquiry “can be a method of research that has a commitment to a respectful and sensitive approach to research (p. 224). In these studies, “data are influenced by the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee as well as other contextual factors” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilder, 1998, p. 9). According to Coulter and Smith (2009), researchers strive to portray experience, to question common understanding, to offer “a degree of interpretive space” (p. 577). Since data is influenced by cultural situation and contextual factors, the decisions made are interpretive. Narrative inquiry can use “literary devices to allow readers to make sense of the study in their own ways. Multiple interpretations by multiple readers are expected and promoted” (Coulter and Smith, 2009, p. 578). Finally, “narrative materials can be analyzed along myriad dimensions, such as contents, structure, style of speech; affective characteristics, motives, attitudes, and beliefs of the narrator, or his or her cognitive level” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilder, 1998, p. 9).

Analysis and Interpretation

My research question addresses the lived experiences of my mother, particularly those that brought her to the profession of teaching, and then how these experiences affected her teaching practices in the one-room school era. Gloria Mehlmann’s (2008) *Gifted to Learn* memoir is a collection of anecdotal notes of former students interwoven with personal and professional reflection, as well as reflection on teaching practices and teacher training. *Gifted to Learn*, although not a perfect parallel to Mom’s experiences, allows for further analysis and interpretation of both the lived experiences and the
teaching practices of these two educators. The shared reading of Mehlmann’s work allowed my co-researcher, Mom, and me opportunity to make comparisons and to observe the contrasts in their experiences. My goal, as the primary researcher in this study, was to have at its conclusion these two former educators meet and discuss these experiences. I did do this to some extent in our shared reading, however, my co-researcher, Mom, died before these two educators could physically interact.

Mehlmann’s (2008) experiences were not only those of separation from place, the reserve, but also separation from her culture. She narrowly escaped the Residential School experience, but her siblings and parents were not so fortunate. Could this move from what she knew and where she felt comfortable parallel the experience my mother had when she left the farm and coincidently moved to the same city, attended the same collegiate and then graduated from the same Normal School? When Mom and I discussed this she noted that Mehlmann (she never called her anything but Mehlmann, and always with a hint of derisiveness) did:

certainly come from a reserve and I didn’t. But, I may as well have because my culture, even though I am not an Indian, was different than most of the kids that I got to know when I went to the city. At least, that’s how I felt, kind of like we both escaped. But she left a bad place, I just left home.

This reflection was huge to me as it demonstrates intersection of social class and gender, to say nothing of colonization, racism and oppression. Discussion of this point also reminded me that, although Mom had eventually travelled the world, she still had a narrow view of First Nations peoples. This is perhaps a typical view, socially-constructed in a white settler society. It could hardly be otherwise given these parameters. She never
fully explained why she felt that the Reserve was a bad place, a place from which Mehlmann needed to escape. Mom’s “escape” not only demonstrates the intersection of social class and gender from her perspective but alludes to her lack of recognition of colonization and perhaps even hints at racism – something she denied.

While doing our shared reading I tried to engage Mom in discussion of the cultural background differences between her and Mehlmann (2008). When we discussed Mehlmann’s personal comment, “…I wasn’t at all sure how my background figured into my value as a teacher” (p. 25) she would not concede that their diverse backgrounds would have any greater impact on either of their teaching practices. Mom said that “we both seemed like we did the best we could with what we had to work with. But I had grown up learning how to make do and she [Mehlmann] didn’t.” When I questioned Mom on this, when I tried to pin her down as to what she really meant, she said, “You have to keep in mind that I started teaching before Mehlmann was born and she [Mehlmann] didn’t live through ‘The Thirties’.” There was little concession from Mom for Mehlmann having been raised on the Reserve, having to ‘make do or not’, but rather the fact that Mom was a child of ‘The Thirties’ seemed, in her mind, to give her the more credible, perhaps the more difficult, childhood experience. No matter how I tried to approach this discussion with Mom, I never fully understood her reasoning. I hoped that when she did a final read of this research she would be able to shed some light, but she did not get that opportunity before she died. I believe that Mom sincerely felt that hers was the better, easier childhood, even though she lived through the Great Depression. When I would try to discuss some of what Mehlmann might have endured she listened but didn’t add much – I honestly think now that this was because she really wasn’t very
educated on what life was like on a reserve, for her, it seemed like a place to escape from and for Mom, circumstances dictated that she leave.

Both women concurred that their teaching training at Normal School was lacking. Upon discussion Mom conceded that it “seemed that she [Mehlmann] thought that she was better prepared than I was.” However, Mehlmann (2008) writes:

Whenever I did anything extraordinarily foolish, such as display my ignorance, I tried to console myself with the belief that teachers college had given me and my fellow classmates too brief an introduction to teaching. They might have tried harder, gone out of their way, but they had not! (p.238)

Mom agreed. She felt that their training was too brief, too general and that it left the new teacher with a wary apprehension of what was to come. Teacher training for both teachers assumed that upon completion they would, according to Mom, “be able to teach it all.” One of Mehlmann’s principals summed it up for her, “Good teachers are able to teach all subjects equally well” (p. 197). The expectation was that teachers, especially, at elementary levels would be capable generalists, able to teach any and all subjects. This expectation, in my personal teaching experience, has not changed, especially in rural Saskatchewan.

Both educators agreed that their training had also not prepared them for social issues in the children’s lives that they worked with. Mehlmann says, “…I never expected I would have to pay close attention to the private crises in student’s lives…Teachers College had told us nothing of this” (p. 102). Mom corroborated this when she told of “having to convince someone that a boy was being abused and I knew I had to get him away from there (his home). I finally got him into the Orange Home (a boy’s home at the
time) in Indian Head. I don’t know how I knew, but I just knew.” When I asked if this would have been a subject discussed in her teacher training I got a snort and a look, no words, but I got the message that clearly it was not.

There was some skepticism in Mom’s voice when she said, “Her [Mehlmann] stories about her students made for interesting reading…I’m not sure how she could remember so much…I was too busy teaching to make those kinds of notes.” We had discussed how Mehlmann had organized her notes/memoirs/student files as laid out in the preface of her book but Mom still alluded that she, Mom, certainly could not have done the same and also done a good job of instructing. My point here though is that Mehlmann kept the notes and used them to write a book and Mom, even though she says that she didn’t have time to make notes, really did. We had copious notes and pieces of information, for example, the school newspaper plus the forty-four yellow sticky notes with hand-written comments by Mom interspersed throughout Mehlmann’s memoir. I think Mom sold herself short.

Conclusion

By using Mehlmann’s (2008) memoir as a counterpoint to contrast these two educators’ experiences I came to realize that neither woman claimed a feminist standpoint, but both led lives prescribed by their gender. Are Mehlmann’s experiences more credible because she is a published author? I think not. Merriam (2009) supports this saying:

Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews. We are thus “closer” to reality than if a data
collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants.

(p. 214)

As the researcher in this study, I found I was more concerned with how I interpreted and represented the data than my participant, my mother, was (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Future research could address the issues of familial studies.

The sky is ink black. It is August, the best month for star gazing in Saskatchewan, according to astronomers and my mother. Picture our three young children and my mother on our dock gazing up into that ocean of star specks. Mom had realized this was a perfect star-gazing night and had wakened them and herded them outside so she could show them the constellations. This was her way, her legacy of learning.
References


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Appendix A

Figure 15: Certificate of Promotion, 1940. Mom’s former student Hugh Tice provided artifacts for the study.
Appendix B

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 10, 2010

TO: Brenda Arnold
Box 269
Avonlea, SK S0H 0C0

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: The Lived Experiences of Three Generations of Teachers (File # 78S0910)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☐ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F). ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Val Mulholland – Faculty of Education

** supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca

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144