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Joanne Yoo

*University of Technology, Sydney*, [Joanne.Yoo@uts.edu.au](mailto:Joanne.Yoo@uts.edu.au)

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## Revisiting and Rewriting Early Career Encounters: Reconstructing one 'Identity Defining' Moment

Joanne Yoo  
University of Technology Sydney  
[Joanne.Yoo@uts.edu.au](mailto:Joanne.Yoo@uts.edu.au)

*Abstract: There has been much research conducted into the effects of early career experiences on future practice. The research indicates that early career academics are particularly susceptible to burnout, as they are still developing their professional knowledge base, and are therefore more reliant on their theoretical knowledge or idealism to interpret practice. They may also be more self-critical and may begin identifying with their negative self-perceptions. The current article describes the importance of re-storying the negative perceptions of one's early career practices; it asserts how hidden stories can encourage beliefs of incompetency that continue to disempower teacher practice. To illustrate, it introduces a narrative of an experienced practitioner, who re-stories a particularly negative early career encounter to construct a more positive self-identity. This narrative seeks to demonstrate how teachers can become vibrant and self-empowered professionals by mentoring the vulnerable selfhoods that exist within their negative tellings.*

### The Teaching Profession and its Current Dilemmas

Teaching is the largest of all graduate professions in Australia, with over 270,000 teachers were recorded in 2006 (ABS, 2007). In other words, there were 60% more teachers than nurses and 50% more teachers than accountants, which were the 2 next largest professions (ABS, 2007). But despite its high numbers, significant portions decide to leave each year due to reasons such as burnout. Research has shown that teachers are overwhelmed by a range of increasing demands, stemming from new government policies to advancing technological changes (Ramsey, 2000). These changes require teachers to master expanding fields of knowledge and navigate new types of teaching responsibilities and roles (Schichte, Yssel & Merbler, 2005). Overwhelmed by these demands, many teachers are increasingly questioning their suitability to the teaching role.

This is especially the case for newly initiated practitioners, who need to overcome the isolation of their role, their heavy workload, as well as the disparities between their expectations and the realities of their work environment (Tait, 2008). Though having just entered the profession, they are also given the same level of work and may even be allotted to the more difficult classes, students and work schedules (Tait, 2008; Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Unfortunately, efforts to master these schedules, to discipline unruly students and to create interesting activities for instruction leave them with little time to reflect and learn from their practice. Early career may also be required to teach in subjects, for which they have had little formal preparation (Bobeck, 2002). This lack of training is believed to lead to a compromise in the teaching standard, which in turn decreases their level of self-confidence (Bobeck,

2002). Feeling overwrought and inadequate, teachers may ultimately decide to leave the profession (Schichte, Yssel & Merbler, 2005).

The exit of qualified and talented teachers has undoubtedly left teaching in Australia to an uncertain future, with significant shortages being predicted for 2014 (ABS, 2007). This number is expected to increase as many existing teachers will reach retirement age in the next 5 years (ABS, 2007). As a response, several studies have been conducted to investigate the nature of teacher attrition. These studies have found that most teachers exit the profession within the first five years of entering. Studies in Australia have shown that 20 to 50% of beginner teachers leave the profession in the first 3 to 5 years (Ramsey, 2000). Whilst in the US, a third of all teachers leave the profession in the first 3 years and almost half do so within 5 years (Boser, 2000). This initiates a vicious cycle of early career practitioner attrition, as new teachers are entering an environment that lacks experienced mentors. Early career teachers may therefore opt to quit teaching due to difficulties of struggling without the hope of support.

Unfortunately, there have been little attempts made to understand the patterns of increasing dissatisfaction and stress felt by early practitioners. Even the preventative measures, such as the mandatory supervision of all early career teachers in NSW state schools, have been poorly implemented (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). A study conducted by Ewing and Smith (2003) has shown that 78 out of 98 respondents (75%) reported that they lacked a mentor, whilst almost half replied that they had not received a supervisor. This meant that about half of the participating early career teachers received no assistance, regardless of the government mandate.

### **Restorying our Early Career Encounters as Possible Intervention**

There are many different strategies used by early career practitioners to cope with or adjust to their new profession. Unfortunately, some of these strategies may lead to greater stress overall, as the root cause of their problem is ignored. Teachers who show effective coping strategies, however, are able to take on a more positive and realistic approach to their abilities and surroundings (Bandura, 1997). Such positive cognitions can lead to greater self-efficacy and feelings of control, which ultimately generates a greater sense of achievement and wellbeing (Bandura, 1997). Cultivating an early career teacher's capacity for self-efficacy and resilience has subsequently been regarded as a key to facilitating professional growth.

Teachers have often written narratives of their practical experience to develop self-efficacy. The literature on teacher practice illustrates how telling and re-telling stories is a natural way for teachers convey their idiosyncratic and craft-based knowledge to others (Clandinin & Connelley, 2002). Early career academics similarly undertake reflective and narrative writing to cultivate a deeper understanding of both their past and current circumstances (Noddings, 1996). These insights are later used to inform future practice, as teachers revisit past experiences with their newly acquired expertise to form a more balanced perspective. Stories of written experience additionally act as a record that show teachers how their knowledge base has been formed, which allows them to reconstruct a more holistic and positive understanding of their teaching practice (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Stories of early career experiences are also significant because of their emotional imprinting (Zemblyas, 2003). For example, certain encounters are believed to be more influential as they evoke a strong emotional response, whether it be

feelings of joy, hope, fear, remorse or sadness. These experiences consequently form the distinctive memories used to define ourselves, as they continue to resurface through similar circumstances (Zemblyas, 2003). Indeed, early career academics are believed to be more emotionally receptive due to their enthusiasm and heightened sensitivity. Ross (1994, p. 391) also confirms that a teacher's self-efficiency develops in their early years and "persist[s] into later years" once it is consolidated. Early career experiences therefore have a particularly a lasting effect on practice, as they form the core encounters constructing one's identity. If these experiences are interpreted positively, they can enhance a practitioner's level of self-efficacy and lead to creative and dynamic practice. Alternatively, a negative interpretation can limit our future endeavours, by lowering the standards set for our practice.

### **The Current Story**

A similar spirit of curiosity, openness and earnestness led me to write stories about my teaching encounters as a TESOL lecturer in a South Korean University. Not only was it my first teaching job, but it also took me outside of Australia to my birth country. After two years of full-time work I undertook a narrative inquiry of my teaching experiences to explore my teaching practices. Such a desire to reflect and learn from early career encounters is discussed by Clandinin and Connelley (2002), who describe how our early career experiences form the foundations of our knowledge base. Although I was not yet aware of the impact of these vibrant and exciting early career encounters, I knew that I could improve on my practices by reflecting on them.

In addition to the newness of the teaching profession, my unique living and working situation intensified these early encounters. Changes in circumstances are a common experience for new academics, who may relocate to a different state, country or cultural setting because of their work (Musselin, 2004). My first teaching job also involved moving abroad to a university that was situated five hours south of the capital of Korea. It was separated from the nearest town by the ocean and rice fields, but despite its relative seclusion, there was a large population of foreign academics and students. I was a member of the language department, which employed twenty international lecturers. Together we had formed a tightly knit community in a shared housing block on campus. This lack of separation between my living and working environment, the cultural differences, and my isolation from the nearest town, added to the colourfulness of my experiences.

Here I experienced one particularly memorable encounter whilst teaching an advanced academic writing class for both native English speakers and Korean nationals. This subject involved a series of assessment tasks that culminated in a single research paper. It was a challenging task, considering it was my first time teaching let alone coordinating such a higher level research writing course. I subsequently wrote in my journal:

*This writing course was something that would have either made or broken my spirit. It was as challenging as it was joyful. And being extremely 'challenging,' I was able to learn a great deal. I found myself abandoning my comfort zones each day, enjoying the unexpected creativity of 'difficult' lessons miraculously evolving (July 2004).*

Among my students was Hannah [a pseudonym], a Korean student who had spent her childhood in a boarding school in India. I had known her to be a very

sensitive and thoughtful student from a previous writing course. She had also started to show great promise in our current class. These thoughts were also recorded in my journal:

*Hannah entered my classroom for the second time in the spring semester of 2004, when I had just begun teaching higher-level composition classes. Once again I was struck by her sad but beautiful eyes. They displayed a sensitivity that I had previously encountered in her work (July 2004).*

This emotion-laden interpretation enabled my encounters to have a transformative effect, especially when Hannah began to struggle with her report. Hannah was experiencing both emotional and physical exhaustion due to weekly visits to a counsellor, where she sought to resolve conflict with her family members. She travelled for long hours each weekend, and had little time or energy to study. The current story describes our attempts to negotiate her studies through these difficulties; it also depicts the bewilderment and remorse I felt when Hannah dropped out of my class.

Hannah's decision to leave was a heavy blow to my ego, as until then I had believed that I was competent enough to help all my students to pass my course. Zemblyas and Chubbuck (2008, p.34)'s case study on the emotional experience of one novice teacher 'Sara' records a similar instance. Sara's interpretation of one particularly negative encounter with a student, as a failure to realise her vision for "socially just teaching," leaves her too self-absorbed to concentrate on her teaching. I had likewise transformed my encounters with Hannah into a narrative of self-inadequacy that continued to inhibit my practices.

To recreate my encounters with Hannah, I have included excerpts of the conversations recorded in my teaching journal. This narrative was re-storied throughout a three year period, to reveal a different outlook on the same encounter. I rewrote the first version, a simple story of Hannah's failure to complete my course, as it continued to evoke puzzling emotions of remorse. This account was rewritten until a deeper story surfaced, which shifted the focus from my failure as a teacher to my identity as the vulnerable story-teller. Excerpts of my narrative are included to shed light on the nature of my interactions with Hannah.

### **Emotional Dissonance: How the Story of *Hannah* Begins**

Stories are believed to contain a wealth of emotion that reveals the hidden truths of lived experience (Zemblyas, 2003). For instance, teachers may choose to retell their stories when they experience emotional dissonance, in which an initial telling does not match up with their intuitive or subconscious understanding. They may also tell stories when the strength of their emotional response alerts them to other salient "truths" (Zemblyas, 2005). In the current study, the emotional dissonance I felt concerning my practice led me to re-tell my story of Hannah. This tension was mainly attributed to a mismatch between my expectations of a "good" teacher, and the level of care that I felt capable of sustaining in the classroom. As I later wrote:

*Perhaps I had retained memories of Hannah, as I believed I had judged her without enough consideration. Alternatively, maybe it was because my feelings were confused; for despite my regret, I also believed I had been fair. So perhaps, I could not let go of Hannah's face, as I had yet to determine whether my interactions with her had been entirely effective. Or maybe it was that I just needed to establish a clear*

*line to define where my responsibilities as a teacher ended and another person's began (August 2004).*

I therefore returned to this particular encounter, as I didn't consider myself to be entirely at fault:

*After this incident, I kept replaying this incident over in my mind. I knew that I could not be held entirely responsible for Hannah's response, but her final comment left me at a loss about what else I could have done. She had not accepted offers for one to one catch up sessions, and had received more than enough extra time for her assignments. I also wanted to be fair to the other students, who had already completed their work. Lastly, it was also possible that my good intentions had actually weakened Hannah's resolve. So finally I decided to withhold any further concessions, until she approached me first (August 2004).*

I felt that this was the decision that finally led Hannah to withdraw from my course. It marked the beginning of the second re-storying process, or the series of "should have" narratives that inspired further guilt and self-doubt.

Attempts to lay to rest the continuing sources of tension in one's teaching career is expressed by O'Loughlin (1990), a seasoned teacher education academic who revisits his account of a short summer course for in-service teachers. He describes the ambiguities that drew him to re-tell this encounter, in which his successful collaborative and innovative teaching techniques surprisingly fail to engage his students. O'Loughlin (1990) becomes frustrated when they resist the freedom he gives them to construct their own learning outcomes. He subsequently enforces his 'innovative' teaching techniques onto his students, making them into rigid and disempowering structures. The ensuing paradox leaves him questioning the methodologies, as well as the motives behind his actions.

This unsettling experience represents an opportunity for O'Loughlin to grow as a self-reflective practitioner, as his feelings of deficiency motivate him to question the fundamental tenets of his teaching practices, which were proven faulty through these experiences (Pinnegar, Lay, Bigham & Dulude, 2005). Self-doubt is, in fact, regarded as a natural part of the teaching profession, as in the earnest desire to help one's students learn, teachers may feel uncertain about the "best" choice of action (Palmer, 2003). They may subsequently question the motivations and effects of their actions, as well as ponder the possibility of more favourable results (Pinnegar et al, 2005). Reflecting on these sources of tension can subsequently lead to teacher growth, by surfacing on a more concrete level to spur on action (Golombek & Johnson, 2004, p.323).

### **The Story of *Hannah* through an *I-It* Perspective**

*Hannah* was written in such an *I-It* period, as I had just entered the teaching profession and wanted to prove myself to be a competent teacher:

*It's my second year out teaching. I'm the youngest member of my faculty, but I have been given the highest composition class as someone saw something in me that I didn't think I had. I need to make sure that I don't disappoint. At the very least, I need to be able to hold my place among the others (July 2004).*

Being doubtful of my teaching abilities, I sought confirmation through more "measurable" outcomes of success. This, however, limited my perceptions to a one-dimensional *I-It* framework. From this egotistical framework, I naturally simplified my encounters with Hannah into a story of personal failure. If Hannah had been a

below average student who had displayed little interest in her work, I may have reached a different conclusion. But she had shown a keen interest in her topic, as well as exhibited sensitivity in researching her ideas. From an *I-It* perspective, it seemed that Hannah could have easily passed the course with better guidance from myself:

*Hannah could not contain her enthusiasm as she described India, the topic that she had chosen for her paper. She slowly drew me into the awe that she felt about her beloved childhood home. . . . and continued to live out my expectations through the annotated bibliographies she submitted for class. Hannah had a natural sense of curiosity that drove her to examine the credibility of her readings (August 2004).*

My focus was on myself rather than Hannah; this prevented me from seeing other related aspects outside my influence, such as the reality of Hannah's personal struggles, as well as her sensitivity. This was despite the fact that I had already experienced the latter in a previous class:

*In our last class Hannah had disclosed in a personal descriptive essay about how she had spent her childhood in India. She described it as being a relatively peaceful period in her life until her father decided to return to Korea. The loneliness she experienced in being left behind in India led to a failed suicide attempt during middle school. She had written about this event with a mixture of frankness and vulnerability (August 2004).*

Being overly critical of my practices, I would also oscillate between feelings of guilt, hope, concern, frustration, remorse and helplessness about whether I had done enough to help Hannah. The literature similarly states that such turbulent emotions are common to teaching, illustrating how "guilt, shame, anger, jealousy, frustration and fear" are as equally common as those of, "love, care, trust and support (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1057)." It also relays how a unique combination of contrasting emotions may be experienced due to the complex human dynamics of a classroom:

*I remember feeling a mixture of guilt and concern, as I knew that my actions were inadequate considering the level of help she needed. My attempts to help her involved writing out a weekly schedule for her that included all her main assessment tasks (September 2004).*

My efforts seemed inadequate considering how far Hannah had fallen behind. It seemed that she lacked the skills needed to manage her own life:

*I also felt troubled at Hannah's inability to pull herself out of her present slump, as who knew what difficulties may lay in the future? (September 2004)*

This concern transformed just as quickly into frustration at Hannah's inability take up my offers of help. This sense of frustration provoked me to say a few regretful parting words:

*I'm really, really sorry, but I haven't been able to finish the paper today. I will get it to you as soon as I can. I just need more time.*

Her words were beginning to sound like excuses.

*Hannah, I have already given you a couple of extensions, and for the sake of being fair to the other students. You need to be responsible and **pay the price** for your actions.*

These words quickly escaped from my mouth and hung awkwardly between us. They were the last words that she spoke before she walked away.

*Haven't I paid for things enough already? (July 2004)*

Later on I could see how Hannah's reply was perhaps directed more at the issues within her own personal life, for all the anxiety, exhaustion and loss, some of which may have been uncovered in her counselling sessions. Reflecting on Hannah's sad eyes and her anxious nail bitten fingers, I could understand why she had asked

whether she had not “suffered enough.” Only a single question was then left remaining, which was, “could I have done things differently?”

Hannah’s reaction was also not what I had expected. I had anticipated a stronger sense of remorse, and a greater determination to keep persevering. Her despair made me question whether she had magnified my comment until it encompassed her other difficulties. Attempts to redeem the situation were futile, and after a few closing lines concerning a revised deadline, she walked away to her next class. The newly revised date for her final paper passed by with no sign of her completed work; so despite the high grade she had received for all her earlier assignments, Hannah ultimately failed the course.

### **Discussion of *Hannah*: The *I-It* Perspective and the Model Teacher Myth**

My story about Hannah originated from intense feelings of remorse and regret. At the time, I relied heavily on my emotions to gauge the dynamics of the classroom, and indeed, the literature states that teaching is “inextricably (an) emotional practice,” due to the relational nature of teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 2001; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Zembylas, 2005). Despite this, there has been little research into the importance of teacher emotion and its effects on a teacher’s level of motivation and development. This is partly attributed to the devaluing of negative emotions, such as confusion, helplessness or disillusionment, to maintain a veneer of teacher professionalism (Shapiro, 2009; McIntyre, 2003). However, by focusing too heavily on maintaining superficial appearances, teachers may forego opportunities to work through their negative emotions to develop a more balanced and compassionate view of their practice.

Attempts to regulate the experience and expression of emotion have been labelled as “emotional management” (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2008). Teachers have been found to consistently engage in emotional management to reach certain career goals. These efforts at regulation are believed to have a significant impact on the emotional health of practitioners, by inhibiting them from off-loading their stress and negativity. Unfortunately, certain practitioners may be willing to make this compromise to promote their own professional agendas (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2008).

But without avenues to safely express and release their negative emotions, these emotions can evolve into a persistent feeling of worry or a “fundamental competence anxiety,” that is, a constant state of fear and self-doubt concerning one’s teaching identity (Hargreaves, 1998, p.142). For instance, teachers may experience anxiety over the disparities felt between their personal and professional life, such as the practice of teaching towards external test-taking practices at the cost of facilitating intrinsically motivated learning (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). Their anxiety may further transform into deeper forms of guilt that become a central preoccupation or a “depressive guilt” (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). Surprisingly, this negative state is believed to stem from the positive desire to provide the best care possible, “(Since) the more important that care is to a teacher, the more emotionally devastating is the experience of failing to provide it” (Hargreaves & Tucker 1991, 496).

The tendency to suppress one’s emotions has been attributed an ego-centred and one-dimensional perspective. Buber (1958) defines such a limited outlook as *I-It* knowing, which depicts the knower limiting the other as an inanimate and voiceless object. Buber (1958) argues that the ego separates and labels what it encounters to be



distinctive. He states that desires to set oneself apart from others can distort our perceptions and limit our view of the other, as knowledge is used to assert one's own superiority and generate endless cycles of competitiveness. *I-It* knowing is heightened during moments of insecurity and anxiety, or other such times when we are fixated on how our "performances" measure up to external standards of success (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2003). *I-It* knowing further constricts our perceptions of ourselves, by reducing our emotional identity to a static and "monolithic landscape" (Shapiro, 2009, p. 35). As such, the *I-It* perspective is more prevalent in the early stages of our career, when our need for validation is greater.

These same teachers, who complain of the increasing expectations placed on them by the broader community, may moreover perpetrate such injustices onto themselves by trying to live up to these standards (Shapiro, 2009). Their attempts to perform to unreachable standards can be detrimental to long-term practice, by making them too exhausted to reflect on their teaching. Such teachers may additionally feel dehumanised, as rather than having their own personhood valued, they conform to external standards that lack creative and dynamic energy (Beattie, 2000, p. 9). The superficial drive to reach *I-It* benchmarks of success can consequently lead to teacher stress and burnout.

Fortunately, voicing my core questions narratively has helped me to recognise these *I-It* fears of incompetency driving my practice, as well as my ego-centred compulsion to be a "successful" teacher. This burden of having to maintain a flawless appearance of competence has been appropriately labelled as the "model teacher myth" (Shapiro, 2009, p.618). This myth is believed to be perpetuated by the authoritative nature of the teaching position, in which teachers are attributed with the burdensome expectation of being superhuman knowledge bearers. Shapiro (2009, p.618) shares his own experience of striving for these often inhumane standards of perfection, stating, ". . . my colleagues and I had chosen to relate to one another as 'educator' rather than human beings. We were allowing an ideal of what teachers should be. . . to dominate our interactions." He warns how such teachers have dehumanised themselves by putting up a false *I-It* facade of perfection.

### **The Alternative: *I-You* knowing and Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Being able to recognise the ego-centred *I-It* outlook driving my practice eventually brought me back to my core teaching philosophies. Such phenomenological explorations into teaching involve questions such as, "What does it mean to be a teacher? What is teaching?" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 41). The current article correspondingly outlines how investigating these core questions can make our experiences richer, by allowing us to be both "profoundly in" and in "direct contact" with the forces that drive us (Van Manen, 1997, p. 5). The storying process likewise allowed me to recognize the core *I-It* beliefs that had inspired my negative interpretations.

This realisation has helped me to "soften" my perceptions to see the interrelatedness of Hannah's experiences and my own. For the purpose of this article, such a softening in perception will be defined through Buber's term *I-You* knowing (1958). *I-You* is believed to allow teachers to form a healthy sense of self, as unlike the *I-It* encounter, the *I-You* depicts the knowing process as being a living encounter between the *knower* and the *other*, such as one's own self, other individuals, or the broader world (Buber, 1958). It describes a more holistic view of knowing as a

relationship, in which the *knower* enters into a dialogue with the *other*, rather than perceiving it through his or her own preconceptions (Buber, 1958). For teachers, the *other* may refer to anything that lies outside their field of reference, such as their subject matter, their students or even themselves. *I-You* knowing subsequently lies at the heart of holistic teaching and learning practice, as it depicts the knowing encounter as a union between the *knower* and the *known* (Palmer, 1989). Through an *I-You* perspective, teachers can explore the contradictions within their practices to facilitate an overall richer understanding of the other (Palmer, 2003).

The way we interpret our core experiences is indeed important, as these beliefs can determine our choice of actions. In other words, teacher's level of self-efficacy or their belief in their own capacity accordingly influences the success of their practice (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Bandura (1997) explains how personal efficacy develops in our early years of teaching through successful practice, as we watch others teach or receive encouragement from peers or supervisors. In my case, my self-efficacy was able to develop as I re-storied my encounters. This process helped me to see factors such as the physical and emotional difficulties, which may have led Hannah to drop out of my class. This newfound awareness also helped me to see possible parallels between Hannah's level of self-efficacy and her topic, in which she described how karma prevented lower caste Indians from creating a better future for themselves.

*Perhaps it was more than just a coincidence that she had chosen to investigate how a sense of 'karma', that is, the conviction of worthlessness restricted an individual's life? Maybe it was these same intuitive beliefs in inadequacy that became a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for Hannah (Jan 2006).*

Such thoughts helped me to move beyond self-criticism to develop greater agency, empowerment and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has been described as the "future directed human strength linked to action," as it defines a teacher's level of effort, goal setting, persistence, resilience, willingness to set new ideas and strategies (Benard, 2003). It is believed to determine how constructively teachers are able to respond to stress, and subsequently how positive and satisfied they feel about their actions (Benard, 2003). This positive interpretation of negative experiences, as well as the implementation of effective stress management strategies, increases a teacher's level of success and their commitment towards the teaching profession (Tait, 2008; Ewing and Manuel, 2005). Lastly, it is believed that a teacher's self-efficacy is formed in their early teaching years, and is therefore more difficult to change once established (Tait, 2008).

Finally, a teacher's level of self-efficacy can manifest in actions directed towards the fulfilment of their expectations (Yost, 2006). A teacher or student with a low sense of self-efficacy may therefore set nominal expectations for achievement, and may make minimal efforts to reach their goals, as they are already convinced of their inadequacy. When confronting difficulties, they may additionally choose to give up due to these same beliefs of incompetency (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Research into the early stories may thereby reveal how teachers have interpreted their encounters to form their level of self-efficacy (Yost, 2006).

A teacher's level of self-efficacy can develop through the guidance of an experienced mentor, who can provide the support and validation needed (Ewing & Smith, 2003). Early career academics themselves express a strong need for dialogue with experienced mentors who can validate their isolated encounters by providing a broader context of teaching experience (McIntyre, 2003). By sharing their concerns with like-minded individuals, they believe that they can receive validation concerning

their actions and decisions, as well as acquire insight into the different ways of responding to diverse teaching situations (McIntyre, 2003). Finally, connecting with seasoned professionals also plays a valuable role in affirming the membership of early career teachers within the broader teaching community (Bobeck, 2002). Hence, it has been hoped that early career practitioners can develop greater resiliency through guidance from those who can value and understand the teacher's unique role (Bobeck, 2002).

As mentioned previously, mentors are not always available due to the shortage of staff and the constraints of a hectic work schedule (Bobeck, 2002). And without the interventions of a mentor, the mistaken conceptions formed early in one's career may persist to inhibit future practice. The ability to re-story one's own early career encounters is thus an invaluable tool, as it enables teachers to "mentor" their own selves through the moments that caused them the greatest angst. Teachers may be able to revisit these negative encounters with greater compassion and maturity, to reconstruct a more positive teaching identity.

### **Narratives: An Expression of Teacher Knowing**

Exploring a teacher's emotional landscape is a difficult process, as it involves puzzling out the contradictions deeply embedded within their identities. Similar thoughts are expressed by Mitton-Kukner, Nelson and Desrochers (2009), who describe how teachers may research their experiences, only to find that their identities as teachers and human beings lie at the heart of their inquiry. This may cause both discomfort and alarm, as they are confronted by the inconsistencies between their beliefs and practices. They may consequently be forced to forego the comforts of an overly simplistic *I-It* stance, as they make the hard efforts to realign their actions with their core teaching philosophies.

*At the same time, it almost seemed that I had taken refuge under this negative telling of failure, as it meant that I was let "off the hook" from the need to be a better teacher (Oct 2006).*

I was also content to relive my mistakes until I found the courage, energy and the time to revisit my encounters through narratives. I felt safer recounting these moments indirectly through symbols, as the latter provided a form for my fleeting sensations. Symbols have accordingly been used to look beyond the literal and concrete to glimpse the tacit dynamics in the classroom, since they lack the constraints of physical form (Clandinin & Connelley, 2002). As a symbolic medium, narratives have been used to convey life's complexities in simple but powerful terms (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). They incorporate an intuitive, creative and active process of knowledge construction that helps teachers make sense of their complex experiences (Palmer, 1983). Teachers naturally incorporate narratives to depict the complex and emotion-laden encounters that occur daily in the classroom. They may use storytelling to construct and express the complexity and intricacy of their practical knowing. Storytelling has thus been regarded as a primary mode of creating and conveying a teacher's knowledge base (Clandinin & Connelley, 2002).

Since *I-You* knowing embodies the complexity of the knowing encounter; it is expressed and cultivated through narratives. Stories facilitate tacit, holistic and symbolic understanding, or *I-You* forms of knowing (Buber, 1958). The current article highlights how *I-You* knowing can be enhanced by storying and re-storying our critical encounters, especially those formed during our *I-It* moments, to help us

develop more empathetic and balanced views of our practices. That is, stories position isolated moments within a narrative sequence of events, so that individuals can see the contradictions and paradoxes of their experiences (Marcic, 2000). This enables individuals to both avoid overly simplistic *I-It* interpretations of their encounters, as well as to revise any existing superficial understandings.

Narrative inquiry is consequently regarded as a holistic *I-You* approach to teacher research, as it encompasses both the “particularities of personal and situational contexts” and relays the idiosyncratic nature of the teaching experience. It also sheds light on the “humanness” of teacher research, in which personal insights are used to inform broader structures of design (Beattie, 2000, p. 3). My narrative of Hannah similarly helped me to recognise the paradoxically positive dimension underlying what was previously a key low point in my teaching career. Acknowledging the intrinsic presence of paradox in daily classroom interactions can hence help practitioners become receptive to the hidden positivity within their encounters.

### **Re-storying for Being and Becoming**

Through the validation I received from uncovering my own “voice” as the mature story-teller, I have come to let go of these unrelenting and frustrating *I-It* efforts to strive towards perfection. Re-storying my encounters has ultimately helped me to draw and respect the boundaries that acknowledge my “humanness” as a teacher, so that I no longer need to attain self-worth through measurable outcomes. This softening in perception is crucial, as teachers may frequently experience pitfalls when navigating the complex teaching and learning terrain. They must maintain an empathetic gaze on the conflicting demands that surround them, to learn from even their most negative encounters. As in Sara’s case, navigating her complex emotions frees her from being overly critical and self-absorbed, so that she can become more “present” to her students’ needs (Zemblyas & Chubbuck, 2008).

Finally, it is believed that our capacity for understanding can flourish through such honest efforts for knowing (Van Manen, 1997). Acts of “reflective reliving” allow us to uncover the mysteries inherent in our experiences, or the feelings that often emerge as a vague but persistent sense of dissonance (Van Manen, 1997, p. 30). My own experience of writing about *Hannah* enabled me to explore the themes buried underneath a previously superficial telling, which had produced and replayed a certain one-sided script of guilt and regret, rather than adding to my growth as a teacher (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Unfortunately, this practice of re-storying our negative encounters in a positive light is regarded more as an option rather than a necessity. This is despite the fact that the process of retelling and reliving destructive points of view can lead to a downward spiral of negativity rather than growth, as an *I-It* outlook generates *I-It* forms of knowing that further “fester(s) in the dark” (Miller & Stroh, 1994, p. 73). My own superficial understanding of *Hannah* had likewise continued to fester until I had come to associate myself with a narrative of failure. This association led me to focus on the incidents that re-affirmed rather than opposed my beliefs of incompetency. In the guise of writing a story about my student, I could therefore replace this self-deprecating narrative with one based on self-awareness and grace. Re-storying can similarly help teachers avoid reliving negative encounters, so that they can re-construct the experiences moulding their identity (Pinnegar et al, 2005).

Re-storying has appropriately been regarded as a form of “identity work,” as it enables individuals to alter their perceptions and sense of being (Mitton-Kukner et al., 2009, p. 1168). Mitton-Kukner et al. (2009) provide one such example of a teacher who is able to question the stereotypical assumptions she had made of one Aboriginal student’s learning style, by paying closer attention to how this student interacted with his peers. By exploring this inconsistency between her desires for openness and her actual stereotypical mind-set, she is able to modify her thoughts and actions and re-negotiate her identity as a self-reflective and critical practitioner. Teachers can likewise make connections between their current practice and how they hope to teach, by making these differences more visible through narrative writing (Beattie, 2000, p. 6). This notion is expressed in the lines of my final narrative:

*A couple of years have passed since Hannah was my student. During this time I have pondered about how I might have added further pressure to her attempts to salvage her personal and family life with my need to have had “left no man behind.” Altogether, these retellings have added another stroke to the image drawn about myself, the knower or teller who perceives, to reveal the colourful emotions driving this particular telling (Sept 2006).*

Through re-storying my encounters with Hannah, new layers of my own personhood have finally emerged, allowing me to align myself to the teacher I hoped to become. The focus has shifted from Hannah’s failure to complete the course, to my own failure to “teach” Hannah. Finally, it has evolved into a story that illustrates how letting go of narrow and ego-centred frameworks can lead to greater possibilities for growth.

### **Paradox, Holism and Teacher Growth**

Acknowledging the mysterious and paradoxical complexities of life encourages growth, as it frees individuals from a comfortable but limiting one-dimensional *I-It* perspective (Merton, 1965). Miller and Stroh (1994) similarly propose that the awareness of conflict over dualities gradually submerges with familiarity until it is finally forgotten. They cite an example of learning to ride a bicycle, as the nervous teetering of a learner transforms into the beauty of momentum when an awareness of the two sides disappears (Miller & Stroh, 1994). Such an emerging awareness of paradox is a major component of my story, as writing helped me to avoid projecting one-sided views onto my experiences. During these times initial awkwardness of managing two extremes would miraculously disappear to reveal a hidden layer I had previously been oblivious to (Marcic, 2000). I could consequently revise my tellings so that they accounted for the ambiguities of human experience.

The re-storied version of *Hannah* is accordingly a more richly layered account, as it attempts to acknowledge my vulnerability as a teacher rather than perpetuate the “model teacher” myth. This final account recognises the often confusing realities of a teacher’s experience; it additionally redefines my moments of weakness as dynamic opportunities for growth (Shapiro, 2009, p. 618). Lastly, it has replaced the exhausting dichotomy of being the “infallible teacher and fallible human,” with open and honest conversations about the difficulties of being in a relational profession (Shapiro, 2009, p. 619).

Such efforts to persevere with trust, whole-heartedness and curiosity can lead to possibilities for holism that not only unifies opposites, but also fulfills our human

capacity for imagination, understanding and morality in the classroom (Palmer, 2003). These notions are visible in the Greek definition of the word healing, “*therapia*,” which depicts empathy as the restoration of something fragmented (Palmer, 1983). This definition implies that teachers can become whole by reconnecting to their own selves and to others. The wholeness of reconnecting with paradoxical and hidden “truths” of my practice helped me to break free from reproducing past “failures” to start rewriting more growth evoking narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988). Beattie (2000, p. 4) confirms how re-storying our lives can lead to such genuine changes in behavior and being, as we create our present and futures through a more empowered understanding of the past, stating, “When it is understood that. . . taken for granted stories can be re-scripted, there is a potential for change and transformation. . .” Beattie (2000) asserts that this hope and means of change can help to sustain teacher professionalism.

Fortunately, this personal story of empowerment does not stop at individual teacher research. My own experience of sharing my story of Hannah with others has taught me how one teacher’s narrative can help other practitioners form connections, by making their practical experience more tangible (Elbaz- Luwisch, 2002). In other words, authenticity can trigger similar expressions of authenticity in others (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). Teachers can accordingly create reflective “pauses” in their readers, as the messages they tell may resonate so powerfully that the reader can momentarily place themselves in the teller’s position (Palmer, 1989). This allows one practitioner’s story of learning to reach out and evoke equally powerful transformations in the lives of others.

Teachers already tell and re-tell their stories of idiosyncratic knowledge on a daily basis, to negotiate personal meaning and to handle the multiple demands from external commitments from administrators, parents and the public (Elbaz- Luwisch, 2002). Finding solidarity through receiving validation by another’s story may help guide them through all these demands, giving them a greater sense of empowerment, regardless of the complexities involved. Teacher stories can also act as case studies to inform wider teacher practice and generate further theoretical discussion about the teaching and learning practice. They can additionally connect to practitioners on a personal level, reminding them of the enthusiasm that first drew them to the profession (Noddings, 2006).

In the light of these benefits, teachers must continue trusting in their intuitions and pursue paradox as a powerful learning tool, to construct and reconstruct positive and creative practices (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010, p. 34). The definition of teacher emotion must accordingly be extended beyond an individual practitioner’s personal disposition or sense of virtue, so that it can be explored as a valuable source of teacher knowledge (Hargreaves, 2001). Moreover, additional efforts must be made to disperse fears that telling one practitioner’s story is too bothersome, too difficult or too narcissistic to undertake. Arguments that stories are too fallible or subjective must also be viewed together with the positive transformations evocative stories can initiate in teacher practice (Bocher & Ellis, 2002). Finally, there need to be greater opportunities to read, tell and retell stories about localized situations, so that individual teachers can develop the resiliency needed navigate their profession as life-long learners (Bobeck, 2002).

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