

# Appendix F - Moving Ahead: A Naturalistic Study of Retention Reversal of Five Elementary School Children

Judith Hehr

## Editor's Note

This appendix contains Judith Hehr's journal version of her study, her chapter on methods, her self-portrayal, and her audit trail to give the readers enough information to get the most out of chapter 7 and to critique her article if they want in connection with Chapter 5.

## Abstract

The first author conducted a naturalistic inquiry of five students who failed Grade 1, and who in the course of the next year were reunited with their chronological peers in Grade 2 and were subsequently promoted to Grade 3 with their peers. Using interviews, observations, three major themes emerged: 1) When teachers see themselves as learners they are willing to meet the learning needs of their children by taking "risks" for them; 2) Children are often innocent victims of school procedures and suffer when questionable educational decisions such as grade retention are made; 3) Parents of retained children tend either to acquiesce to school authority or to avoid responsibility for decisions made concerning their children. In addition to reporting this research, the authors have included an extensive list of related readings on grade retention for those interested in additional information.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

In North American schools, the traditional practice of using grade retention to bolster

academic achievement persists. Frymier (1989) estimated that 5.6 million students in the United States (14% of the total school population of 40 million students) have repeated a grade during the past 12 years. Shepard and Smith (1990) have acknowledged the universality of the practice in the United States and estimated “that 5 to 7 percent of public school children (about 2 children in every classroom of 30) are retained in the U.S. annually” (p. 84).

Why do educators continue the practice of grade retention? Why do they fail children “despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes” (Holmes & Matthews, 1984, p. 232)?

## **The Research Problem**

The problem that invoked this study was that the traditional practice of using grade retention to bolster academic achievement persists in North American schools, despite the paucity of evidence claiming its benefit.

## **The Debate Goes On**

From the birth of graded schools, there has been a conflict between the notion of social promotion (advancing children with their peers) and grade repetition (keeping students behind until grade-specific skills are mastered). Throughout this century, educators have debated this dilemma. From 1900 to 1930, for example, educators developed practices to handle large numbers of students efficiently, which resulted in high grade retention rates. However, over the next 40 years (1930 to 1970), the pervasive practice in schools was social promotion. And with the advent of minimum competency testing and the reforms of the 1980s, a gradual increase in grade retention returned as standard educational practice.

## **The Study**

This study was a naturalistic inquiry of five students who failed Grade 1, and who in the course of the next year were reunited with their chronological peers in Grade 2 and were subsequently promoted to Grade 3 with their peers.

The research team, Nancy, a Grade 1 teacher, Warren, a Grade 2 teacher, and the first author, an assistant principal, spent 10 months with the five children, watching, listening, questioning, and talking. They related to these children in a manner not unlike that of parents (Van Manen, 1991). They were interested in the children’s growth and learning and attempted to help them acquire insight into their own learning.

Data were collected through observations, interviews, and artifacts from the children, parents, and teachers. After each taped interview the results were transcribed and carefully analyzed.

## **School Setting**

The school in this study is a medium-sized elementary school within the Calgary Board of Education in Alberta, Canada. It has approximately 450 students who represent many different cultural backgrounds. The school has a “high needs” designation; a **significant percentage of its population is on social assistance and comes from** non-traditional family structures. The school population is also highly transient - approximately 33% each year.

## **The Five Informants**

Brittany, Matt, Laura, Robbie, and Mari were the foci of the study. They were chosen as a result of an invitation from the first author to three Grade 1 teachers to identify any retained children within their classrooms. The teachers were also asked to commit themselves to involvement in the study. Responses to these invitations were received at different times after the start of the 1991-92 school year.

One of the Grade 1 teachers showed an immediate interest in the study and supplied the names of three girls who had been retained. The three girls were observed for 10 months (September 1991 to June 1992). Following spring break another Grade 1 teacher wanted two boys to become members of the study. They were observed for 3 months (March 1992 to June 1992). After each child was identified for grade advancement the parents were consulted.

Most school days, there was close contact with these children: in their classrooms; entering and leaving the school; at play, at recess, and at noon; parent/teacher reporting conferences, communicating with their parents by phone and through interviews, and talking with their teachers regularly.

## **Emergent Themes**

Through analysis based on naturalistic inquiry (Spradley, 1980) three major themes emerged from the interviews, observations, and examination of the artifacts. They were:

1. When teachers see themselves as learners they are willing to meet the learning needs of their children by taking “risks” for them.
2. Children are often innocent victims of school procedures and suffer when questionable educational decisions such as grade retention are made.
3. Parents of retained children tend either to acquiesce to school authority or to avoid responsibility for decisions made concerning their children.

## **Discussion of the Themes**

## **Theme One: Partners in Learning**

As educators inquire into the experiences of children, a deep understanding of children's needs seems to develop, giving them (educators) confidence to take risks for children. The research team immersed themselves in the research and came to understand the inappropriateness of grade retention. Their confidence in their knowledge increased and as a result they became quite firm in their willingness to take risks for these children. Knowing became a form of doing. Polanyi (1969) discussed the relationship between knowledge and activity:

Knowledge is an activity which would be better described as a process of knowing. Indeed, as the scientist goes on enquiring into yet uncomprehended experiences, so do those who accept his discoveries as established knowledge keep applying this to ever changing situations . . . towards a deeper understanding of what is already known. (p. 132)

The researchers were constantly interpreting, thinking, and acting as members of a learning community. They dealt with situations, predicaments, possibilities and difficulties. They departed from the habitual tendency to keep doing what was done before and were able to transcend previous traditional practice.

Newman (1988) reaffirmed the importance of learning from and with children and taking risks for them: "It requires that we become willing to learn from our students.

Adopting a learning-through-teaching stance involves risk. It means giving up security and complacency and consciously allowing ourselves to become vulnerable" (p. 25).

## **Theme Two: Children as Victims**

Educators continue to allow school procedures to erect barriers for children rather than create procedures to facilitate learning. In effect, adults have become the power brokers in schools and children the pawns. Children's voices are heard as little whispers; adults tend to ignore their feelings and ideas. Even so, children continue to make sense of their world. Matt's response to the question, "Do you think if you have children you will want them to fail a grade?" is an example of someone trying to make meaning. He answered:

No, 'cause you have to do the same work and sometimes you just have to do it different. But, in a way, yes. And in a way, no. Yes, because they could get better at work and no because it's hard on them. It doesn't feel good. It feels bad.

Matt's confusion arises from his belief that teachers and parents know what is best for him.

Educators listen only superficially to the voices of children. In every interview during the 10 months of research, the children were consistent in their declarations that they all wanted to be in Grade 2 rather than repeating Grade 1. But at the end of the previous June the

bureaucracy had made a decision-Laura, Britney, Mari, Matt, and Robbie had been failed.

What was the acceptable thing for teachers and parents to do? Supporting the decision was probably not only the most convenient thing to do but it was also considered to be the only professionally ethical thing to do as well. Even those, including the researchers, who worked directly with the children on a daily basis did not support the concept of retention and yet they quietly observed and listened for 5 months before they had the courage to listen to the voices of the children. As professionals, they had observed, reflected, questioned, read, discussed, and challenged their personal views. Yet it took 5 months before they were willing to take action. The culture of the school system was powerful and it took courage to reverse a policy decision and not harm these five little ones. A decision was made. The children were moved into Grade 2. Mistrust and discomfort surfaced. Teachers commented: "Were children being allowed to make decisions?" "They just keep moving the children into different classes." "Don't they understand how much work it takes to change the data base and reorganize the files?"

But the research team heard the expressions of hurt from these children and their parents. They decided to follow Paley's (1991) "golden rule" about establishing acceptance and understanding with children so they would no longer consider themselves as victims: "Do not do to a single child that which the child in you would fear, for the chief enemy of the self is fear. Give unto every child that which we still need" (p. 156).

### **Theme Three: Parents' Acquiescence**

From the voices of the parents it was evident that they wanted what was best for their children. Matt's mother commented:

I don't want to push Matt too hard. I don't want him to start hating school. He loves coming to school but at the same time it is in the back of my mind, I am hoping that he is doing well enough by the end of this year that he will only have a couple of months or maybe until Christmas time next year and hopefully be put into Grade 3. But, what is going through my mind right now? Hope.

The perceived authority and power of teachers unnerves parents and causes them to relinquish their responsibility as primary supporters of their children. Parents do not have the confidence to engage in a partnership with teachers with respect to their child's learning. Matt's mother again commented: "I didn't want him to stay in Grade 1. But, when you have the teacher telling you that it is the best thing for your son . . . It bothered me but I never questioned."

During an interview, it was painfully clear that Laura's parents also lacked confidence in dealing with school officials. Laura's father was asked, "If a year from now, another teacher came to you and said, 'We would like to repeat Laura this year,' would you support that decision?" He answered, "Well I would feel bad but if she had to stay, okay."

Robbie's mother reiterated her inability to challenge decisions regarding Robbie's learning. She commented:

To me it's like, you know where he is on the scale exactly. I don't know. The school knows more. I mean, even though he is my son, I feel the school knows more. . . And to me it is like, okay if they want to put him into Grade 2 or into Grade 3 that's fine by me because he is ready in their eyes. Points of Reflection

As a result of this experience, educators should:

1. Inquire into the experiences of children to obtain a deeper understanding of them-this may lead to taking risks for the children.
2. Examine school procedures and questionable educational decisions that victimize children.
3. Neither acquiesce to school authority nor avoid responsibility when making decisions concerning children.
4. Continue enquiring into yet uncomprehended experiences. If a discovery about these experiences is made and accepted "as established knowledge keep applying this to ever changing situations . . . towards a deeper understanding of what is already known" (Polanyi, 1969, p. 132).

## References

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## Study Notes

Interviews with child (A) 24 interviews

(B) Interviews with parents. (B) 31 interviews

(C) Meetings with (C) September 1, 1991 - June 29, learners/researchers 1992

(D) Recorded tapes from all the (D) September 1991 - June 1992 sources (researchers, parents, 575 pages and children)

(E) Fieldnotes (E) Written notes were kept from

1. from observations of June 1991 - August 1992 classrooms

2. from informal discussion with informants

3. from informal discussion with interested professionals

(F) Reflective Journal (F) Kept throughout the year;

1. personal Nancy's and Warren's were used

2. Warren's for the referential adequacy

3. Nancy's check.

(G) Collection of articles and (G) Collected throughout the year. artifacts.

3. Data Analysis

(A) Transcribed tapes (A) computer transcripts, portrayals

(B) Domain Analysis (B) colour coded entries to coincide with each informant

(C) Taxonomic Analysis (C) nodes and line charts

(D) Componential Analysis (D) componential analysis charts

(E) Theme Analysis (E) major themes emerged

4. Meeting Standards

(A) Methodological Notes (A) decisions

Journal Notes direction of study informants

Artifacts-Report Cards, participation learner/researchers

Cum. Files involved

literature review

possible themes

(B) Trustworthiness

1. Credibility

a. Prolonged a. 10 month involvement with the

engagement children and teachers at site  
daily  
b. persistent b. intense observation and  
observation interviewing  
c triangulation c. interviews, observations,  
meeting with parents,  
learner/researchers, school  
resource group, administrators  
d. peer debriefing d. Eari Ann, Kandace and Gary  
e. negative case e. no contradictory cases were  
analysis found  
f. referential f. Warren's and Nancy's reflective  
adequacy check journals  
g. member check g. paraphrased comments back to  
children, met with parents and  
teachers

(B) Transferability (B) clear descriptions, thick  
- description

(C) Dependability (C) Audit trail\$ transcribed tapes,  
archives, artifacts

(D) Confirmability (D) dated references throughout  
study

## 5. Writing up the Study

(A) dissertation prospectus (A) Chapters 1,2,3; references

(B) transcribed tapes, (B) quotes, report card comments  
personal notes and artifacts

## **Audit Trail**

Listed are all the scheduled interviews and meetings. Being a member of the school  
community, I had the opportunity to regularly interact with the children, parents, and  
teachers.

August 26, 1991 Meeting with Nancy to discuss research

August 27, 1991 Meeting with Britney's mother

August 29, 1991 Discussed research with principal

September 1, 1991 Telephone interview with Mari Ann, peer debriefer

September 5, 1991 Interview with Nancy

September 9, 1991 Meeting with Doris's mother

September 12, 1991 Interview with Nancy

September 19, 1991 Interview with Nancy

September 22, 1991 Telephone interview with Mari Ann

September 26, 27 & 28 Parent-Teacher Interviews-Meeting with Laura's, Britney's, and



Mari's parents to discuss research and sign permission forms.

October 2, 1991 Interview with Mari and mother

October 3, 1991 Interview with Nancy

October 3, 1991 Meeting with principal and Nancy

October 10, 1991 Nancy interviewed Mari's mother

October 19, 1991 Meeting with Gary (a peer debriefer)

October 22, 1991 Interview with John

October 29, 1991 Interview with Nancy

November 5, 1991 Interview with Nancy

November 6, 1991 Meeting with John's parents

November 14, 1991 Meeting with John's parents

November 27, 28 & 29 Parent-Teacher Conferences-Meeting with Mari's, Britney's, and Laura's parents

December 18, 1991 Meeting with Laura's father

December 20, 1991 Interview with Mari

January 9, 1992 Interview with Nancy

January 10, 1992 Interview with Laura, Mari, and Britney

January 19, 1992 Telephone interview with Mari Ann

January 30, 1992 Interview with Britney's mother

February 4, 1992 Interview with Britney

February 6, 1992 Interview with Laura's parents

February 12, 1992 Interview with Mari's mother

March 10, 1992 Interview with Britney, Mari, and Laura

March 10, 1992 Meeting with Warren

March 19, 1992 Meeting with Warren

March 23, 1992 Meeting with Warren

March 24, 1992 Meeting with Warren and Nancy

March 25, 26 & 27 Parent-Teacher Conferences-Meeting with Britney's, Laura's, and Mari's parents

April 14, 1992 Observed in Mari Ann's classroom

April 14, 1992 Meeting with Gary and Kandace (peer debriefers)

April 21, 1991 Meeting with Robbie and Mari

April 22, 1992 Meeting with Matt's Eother April 23, 1992 Meeting with Nancy and Warren

April 23, 1992 Meeting with Robbie's mother

April 27, 1992 Meeting with Mari's mother

May 11, 1992 School Resource Group Meeting

May 12, 1992 Meeting with Laura

May 21, 1992 Meeting with Nancy and Warren

May 21, 1992 Interview Matt and Robbie

May 22, 1992 Dr. Shute met t`e children

May 25, 1992 Meeting with Britney's parents

May 28, 1992 Interview with Mari

June 1, 1992 Interview with Matt's father

June 2, 1992 Interview with Robbie's mother

June 2, 1992 Meeting with Doris' parents  
June 4, 1992 Meeting with Britney's parents  
June 11, 1992 Interview with Mari  
June 11, 1992 Meeting with Warren  
June 12, 1992 Interview with Britney  
June 13, 1992 Interview with Laura  
June 13, 1992 Interview with Laura's parents  
June 14, 1992 Telephone Interview with Mari Ann  
June 14, 1992 Interview with Matt  
June 15, 1992 Mari Ann visits school  
June 15, 1992 Interview with Robbie  
June 15, 1992 Meeting with Robbie's mother  
June 17, 1992 Interview with Matt  
June 22, 1992 Meeting with Warren  
June 26, 1992 Meeting with Mari's mother  
June 29, 1992 Interview with Matt and his mother  
July 6, 1992 Examined Nancy and Warren's personal journals (referential adequacy check)

## **Chapter 2 - Methods and Procedures**

The problem that invoked this study is that the traditional practice of using grade retention to bolster academic achievement persists in North American schools, despite the paucity of evidence claiming its benefit. The purpose of this study was to conduct a naturalistic inquiry of five students who failed Grade 1, and who in the course of the next year were reunited with their chronological peers in Grade 2 and were subsequently promoted to Grade 3 with their peers. The study is a description of the interpretation of the meaning of conversations and observations of five retained students, their parents, and their teachers within a "lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990).

### **Research Design**

This study was a naturalistic journey using observation and repeated interviews of five students who failed Grade 1, and who in the course of the next year were reunited with their chronological peers in Grade 2 and were subsequently promoted to Grade 3 with their peers. In addition, the parents and the teachers were interviewed.

The design of this study followed guidelines outlined in Williams's *Naturalistic Inquiry Methods* (Williams, 1988), Spradley's *Participant Observation* (Spradley, 1980), *The Ethnographic Interview* (Spradley, 1979), and Van Manen's *Researching Lived Experiences* (1990). An audit trail and field journal were kept as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

### **The Researcher's Personal Interest**

Ten months were spent with the five children within the school community- observing,

listening, questioning, and talking. As an assistant principal, the researcher related to these children in a manner not unlike that of a parent (Van Manen, 1991). Of interest were the children's growth and learning, and attempts to help them acquire insight into their own learning.

In keeping with a naturalistic study, the research was "quest" oriented. Van Hesteren (1986) noted that this orientation is characterized by:

1. a need to question and explore the unfamiliar.
2. a need for "openness to experience" and looking beyond and outside predetermined boundaries.
3. a need to "experience vulnerability" where one questions personal world views and does not assume that phenomena are valid or obvious.
4. a need for "quality of self awareness" in which one reflects on personal bias. (p. 211-212)

## **Population**

The school in this study is a medium-sized elementary school within the Calgary Board of Education in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. It has approximately 450 students who represent many different cultural backgrounds. The school has a "high needs" designation; a significant percentage of its population is on social assistance and comes from non-traditional family structures. The school population is also highly transient- approximately 33% each year. More information about the school is provided in Chapter 3 under the Setting.

## **Sampling of Informants**

Five first-grade children were the foci of the study even though six children had been identified as having failed Grade 1. They were chosen as a result of an invitation to three Grade 1 teachers. The invitation requested teachers to identify retained children within their classrooms and to commit to involvement in the study. Responses to these invitations were received at different times following the beginning of the 1991-92 school year in September.

One of the Grade 1 teachers, Nancy, showed an immediate interest in the study and supplied the names of three girls. Several weeks later she received a new student who had also been retained. He was a part of the study for the last 2 weeks in October and the first 3 weeks in November. He then transferred to a new school. In this limited time he had some impact on the study. After having been observed and assessed for 2 weeks, he became the first child to move from Grade 1 to Grade 2 to rejoin his chronological peers. The three girls were observed for 10 months (September 1991 to June 1992). Following the spring break, another Grade 1 teacher requested that two boys from her class become members of the

study. They were observed for 3 months (March 1992 to June 1992). After each child was identified the parents were contacted and consulted. Parental consent forms were signed permitting their children to participate in the study.

Warren, a Grade 2 teacher who was hired at the beginning of October, was also interested in the study. He had encouraged and supported all the activities prior to moving the children to Grade 2, and all the children moved into his classroom. As a result of Nancy's and Warren's interest and commitment, a team of researchers emerged.

Most school days, there was close contact with these children: in their classrooms; entering and leaving the school; at play, at recess, and at noon; parent/teacher reporting conferences, phone calls and interviews with parents; and conversation with their teachers.

## **Data Analysis**

Data from the children, parents, and teachers were collected through observations, interviews, and artifacts. After each taped interview the results were transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. Key words and phrases were identified using a domain analysis (Spradley, 1980).

Inferences and conclusions were drawn using taxonomic analysis (Spradley, 1980). A componential analysis was also performed, the third step of which identified units of meaning, which provided attributes associated with cultural meaning. The theme analysis was carried out using the procedures described by Spradley (1980) concerning the identification of universal themes. From this analysis surfaced examples of cultural contradictions (teacher as learner, teachers' risk-taking), of social control (innocent victims), management of impersonal social relationships (parental acquiescence), and status maintenance (authority of teachers).

## **Trustworthiness Techniques**

In this study, qualitative research trustworthiness standards, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, have replaced traditional quantitative research evaluation criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

**Credibility.** Credibility requires the critical reader to view the study as believable and supportive of the people who provided the information (Williams, 1988). Information from the children was checked regularly by verbally paraphrasing their comments. Also, at the beginning of each interview with the parents, an overview of the comments to date was provided and checked for interpretative accuracy. Bi-monthly after school transcribed tapes were shared and discussed with the children's teachers. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) seven techniques were followed to enhance credibility and the participants' emic perspectives were highlighted (Williams, 1988).

Prolonged engagement. Williams (1988) commented on the need for the researcher to be present at the site of the study long enough to build trust, to engage in the diversity of experiences afforded the respondents, and to overcome distortions that may result. The interaction with the participants was maintained over a 10 month period. The three girls were observed and interviewed from September through June, and the two boys from March through June. The researcher's participation in the learning environment facilitated the opportunity for trust to be established. As a result of her observation of the children in all aspects of their learning environment, she became a member of their "club of learners" (Smith, 1988).

Persistent observation. The children, their parents, or their teachers were spoken to or observed almost daily. Many times it was possible to feel as though one stood "in the fullness of life, in the midst of the world of living relations and shared situations" and could actively explore "the category of lived experiences in all its modalities and aspects" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 32).

Triangulation. Findings were verified through multiple sources of information and data collection. Regular contact was maintained with the classroom teachers and the parents, collecting data through interviews, observations, and artifacts. The research team kept reflective journals. All the data were regularly cross-checked and confirmed and were used to verify the findings and conclusions.

Peer debriefing. The researcher was very fortunate to be in contact with a teacher friend from the County of Wheatland who asked many probing questions. Telephone calls and personal visits provided opportunities for clarification and refocusing. The peer debriefer also had a strong belief in retention. Her comments prompted an attempt to contact the former teachers of the retained students. The conversation with one of these teachers re-emphasized the emerging theme of teacher belief systems and failure, verifying Smith's (1989) notion on teachers' beliefs:

If we can understand teachers' beliefs or mental constructs about how children learn, then we will have an insight into the myriad of day to day instructional decisions that teachers make about what to teach when, how to organize lessons, and even whom to teach. (p. 132)

Negative case analysis. Hypotheses were developed from the fieldwork and searched for instances which contradicted the conclusions. No contradictions were found.

Referential adequacy checks. The data from the interviews and observations were analyzed. The two teachers' personal journals were set aside for later analysis.

Member checks. Because of the age of the informants, portions of the transcribed material were read to the children; they were asked if they remembered having shared that information and if there were things they wanted to change. Parents were periodically contacted to corroborate the stories and comments shared by their children.

Emic perspective. Interviews with parents, teachers, and the children were relied on heavily as a source of information describing their understanding and feelings from the events of the study period. Accordingly, an “emic” perspective, rather than a purely personal one, was developed to the fullest extent possible.

Transferability. Clear descriptions of the time and context were provided. Working hypotheses were developed through “thick description” of the study. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) stated that qualitative researchers should approach generalizability with the belief that if they have carefully documented a given setting or group of subjects, it becomes the responsibility of the readers to make connections into their particular settings.

Dependability and Confirmability. To ensure dependability (quality of the process) and confirmability (quality of the results) an audit trail was maintained, all interviews were transcribed, and artifacts were collected, including writing samples, copies of report cards, comments from parent teacher interviews, and student cumulative files. The audit trail included the dates of meetings and the participants involved. The research team also kept journals with practical comments, reflections, and questions.

Other Criteria. In addition to those suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), a number of other procedures (Williams, 1988) were used to enhance trustworthiness.

The study addressed a meaningful problem, grade repetition. As the literature was examined, it became apparent that limited information was available from the child’s point of view. The themes that were identified are of broad-based relevance to educators and parents.

The study was conducted under natural conditions. However, as a member of the leadership team, the role of the assistant principal carries with it the authority to have input into decisions regarding the placement of children. It is openly acknowledged that this authority was exercised at times during the course of the project. However, all decisions were made in consultation with the parents and fellow researchers.

The children were treated with respect and their anonymity has been maintained with pseudonyms. To the extent possible, they were apprised of the content of this study.

The sample was also the delimitation. The Grade 1 teachers were invited to identify all the children who had been failed, and during the study all these children were observed and interviewed.

In summary, this project was conducted in a natural setting using the techniques of participant observation, interview, and document analysis. To the extent possible, the work conforms to the standards described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Williams (1988) to ensure the trustworthiness of naturalistic research.

## Chapter 3 - Portrayals

The following portrayals provide background about the five children the foci of the study and two teachers, fellow researchers.

### The Researcher

Something in a river's changing does not change. The water moves but there is an unchanging that is always present for its own becoming and passing. Know that all is changing but also that the changing is the All. Trust the unchanging in all changing. To be the changing, change. To be the unchanging, let the changing change. (Grigg, 1991, p. 123).

My life's river flows at a rapid pace. My banks are well-defined but constantly changing. My river began its flow March 10, 1951 in Lethbridge, Alberta. From the beginning my parents reared me in a strong Christian home on a farm near the town of Nobleford. One of four daughters, my formative years involved participating in tasks that society traditionally believed to be those of the male. I milked cows, fed pigs, gathered eggs, seeded, and harvested. In Grade 12, I remember being the only woman to receive special permission to be excused from school to harvest the crops.

School was very important in our family. My parents expected that I attend, show respect, and always strive to obtain good grades. However, throughout my school experience sports and friends were also very important. My need to express myself

verbally was always a menace. I recall spending time in the hall in Grade 1 as a reminder of the importance of listening. I decided early to nurture my independence but knew if I was going to survive I needed to learn how to play the school game. I watched my sisters. My oldest sister never did anything wrong and yet appeared under pressure. My sister 2 years older than I often attempted to achieve recognition for her individuality and yet often appeared to be in trouble. I quickly came to understand that if I was prepared to undertake adult responsibilities, privileges would not be withheld. This philosophy usually proved advantageous. However, the responsibility for providing companionship to my sister who was 5 years younger was carried out with disdain. She needed to be monitored as she wanted to tattle on me to my parents.

Living in a close-knit farming community and having 52 first cousins as a part of my extended family made life complicated. Competition among the relatives was present and strong. Hard work was equated with goodliness and godliness. As a member of this culture, I knew I needed to strive for excellence. I was always in the top quarter of my class and excelled at sports. Keeping my marks up prevented disapproval from teachers and parents. Then came a major change. I fell in love in my last year of high school. This overshadowed all my learning. I married in the spring of that year and maintained enough focus on school to complete high school in June, meeting the requirements for university entrance.

With adulthood and marriage came additional responsibilities and a brief respite from formal education. My husband and I moved to a small town outside of Calgary and had two children, Kent and Kristie. After 3 years my husband received a promotion, which initiated a move to another small town. There I attempted to fulfill the role of principal's wife. Once again my independence was frowned upon. My tenacious spirit however, allowed me to rise above the old west's image of women (being supported by and subservient to the husband) and to earn some personal income and start a career by establishing a kindergarten program in my home.

Then came the breakthrough. I was able to return to formal studies. My husband accepted a position with the University of Calgary. I completed a Bachelor of Education with a Diploma in Early Childhood Education and accepted a teaching position with the Calgary Board of Education. During the next 10 years, while teaching full time, I completed another diploma in Educational Psychology majoring in Computer Applications and a Masters of Arts in Education, Administration. At present, I am meeting the needs of children and staff as a teacher-administrator in a public elementary school in Calgary, Alberta.

Throughout this hectic schedule my husband and children have always remained my primary focus. I am very supportive of my husband in his career as an educator and teacher-politician. My son, age 22, and my daughter, age 20, continue to provide me with opportunities to learn. I have enjoyed being a hockey, swimming, figure skating, and baseball mom.

But there has been a dramatic change in the flow of my river. A veritable flood caused the banks to break. Life is fragile and new challenges needed to be faced.

Mount Royal College hockey player Kent Hehr, 21, was last night upgraded from critical to serious condition in the Foothills Hospital. The shooting came after a vehicle, with two occupants, chased the car in which Hehr was a passenger for 15 blocks. When the cars reached the 4900 block of Crowchild Trail south at 2:50 A.M., a shot was fired from a small-calibre handgun. The bullet went right through Hehr's neck as he sat in the car's front passenger seat, said Inspector Randy Cottrell. "The slug caught the victim in the throat and severely damaged his spinal cord as it passed through."

"This appears to be a random senseless shooting," said Inspector Ray McBrien. (Calgary Sun, 1991)

On October 3, 1991 my son became a quadriplegic. He has no use of his hands or his body below the breast line. Initially, his life was severely threatened. For 2 days following the incident Kent was able to breathe on his own without the assistance of a ventilator. However, on the third day, breathing became so labored that the doctors ventilated his lungs by inserting a tube into his nose. His vital functions were assisted by tubes and monitored by machines. There was no guarantee that Kent would be able to breathe on his own again.



But Kent is alive and off the ventilator. He is able to manipulate an electric wheelchair and with the help of special devices is beginning to feed himself.

As I wrote this portrayal I read for the first time my journal entries since my son's incident. The importance of family support is reinforced.

### **October 14- Thanksgiving Day: Memories of the Past Twelve Days**

The pulmonary surgeon requested the anesthesiologist insert a tube down Kent's nose connecting him to a ventilator . . . Met Rod who is ventilator dependent. What a terrific individual! But, I pray Kent may be able to breath on his own again one day . . . Dick's fatherly caring for our son who knows his Dad will always be there . . . Watching Kristie respond to Kent. Absolutely amazing. Sensitive, caring-a real sister. In the toughest moments Kent has requested his sister . . . My sister Joan for caring and beginning a new relationship with Kent . . . My sister Karen's special relationship with my children. She has a sixth sense. She helped raise our children and I believe she will stand beside us all the way . . . My sister Shirley, and her three children, David, Wade, and Cheri for understanding Kent and Kristie's world . . . Sisters-in-law and brothers-in-laws . . . My parents, prayer and unconditional love . . . Kent for being able to joke and cajole his grandparents into seeing things positively. Good news! Grandpa and Grandma said Kent smiled at them today when Grandpa joked about being deaf.

My river continued to flow. I began to understand my emotions. I knew the feelings of anger, grief, fear, and depression. I worked on relinquishing my need to feel in control. I have come to realize I am only a part of a very complex cosmos. There are the forces of God in nature. There are the actions, thoughts, and feelings of my fellow human beings. I am one small interdependent and inter-related person within nature.

This connectedness is also true of my educational environment. I am growing, changing, and facilitating learning with the students and staff. I reaffirm daily my understanding of the importance of children's learning and development in the context of their larger biography-society. The children and staff have made it possible for me to transcend myself, to say I hope and to live with hope.

I know the five students I observed in this study have different talents and struggles. Together we tried to maximize our capabilities. We tried new ideas and took risks. We reflected.

My river continues to flow. I look forward to each new day with the understanding that some things will not change. I am thankful for the love and support of my family and friends as together we accepted the challenges that we will face. We will strive to make our world a better place for all humankind.

## The Setting

The school in this study is a medium-sized elementary school of approximately 450 students within the Calgary Board of Education in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. This system is one of the largest in Canada with a population of approximately 95,000 students. The district operates over 150 elementary schools, 50 junior high, and 15 senior high schools, and employs an instructional staff of approximately 6,000 teachers. It has a yearly budget of over half a billion dollars. The Calgary Board of Education's mission statement is to ensure individual student development through effective education.

About 80% of the families in the neighborhood live in multiple-unit housing while the remaining 20% live in single-family dwellings. There are a variety of socioeconomic groups represented but 60% to 70% of the families are in economic difficulty. From an informal survey done by the school staff, 40% of the families would not be considered "traditional" (a husband and a wife together in a first marriage). There are 40 English as a Second Language students and a small First Nations population. The children attending are very transient with about a 33% turnover annually. There has appeared to be an increase in the number of dysfunctional families because of the current recession in the Canadian economy. Parents bring their problems to the school and seek support for budgeting, prioritizing, and parenting. Unfortunately, the provincial government's social service departments are also experiencing budget restraints, the result of which is that more parents are relying on the school for support.

In an attempt to meet family needs, the school encourages outside agencies to provide support. There is a Boys and Girls Club attached to the school. The City of Calgary Parks and Recreation department offers programs in the gymnasium after school. The exceptional needs of the school population are acknowledged by the school board and provided with extra funds. A portion of these funds was allocated to cover the cost of paying an assistant to organize and oversee a breakfast program for an hour each morning. There is no charge to the parents for this program. The attendance varies.

Approximately 12 children eat breakfast daily and during the last 2 weeks of the month this number increases as food budgets at home are depleted. Private companies and charities also assist with goods and services for the school. This results in coats, hats, mittens, shoes, and boots being available for the children as needed. There are also three on-site community operated lunchroom programs. In the fall of 1992, a before and after school care program will be available.

Approximately 21 professional staff and 14 support staff work collaboratively to meet the needs of students. Staff members continuously examine their beliefs about children and learning. The school philosophy is based on the "rights of children." "Children are not there primarily for us. We are there primarily for them" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). Our focus is children and respect for them. Staff members are encouraged to articulate their beliefs, to actively participate in their classrooms, and to view themselves as learners. Teachers daily

reflect on their knowledge of children and how they can extend the children's learning.

The children actively participate in many of the activities offered. They are given opportunities to work individually, in pairs, groups, and classes. With the realization that knowledge and learning can never be separated, activities are planned to link the children's prior knowledge to new concepts. Children are encouraged to make connections with their everyday world. They are encouraged to read, write, and talk in purposeful ways, reflect on their learning, and evaluate what they have learned.

Parents are encouraged to become involved in their children's learning. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of the parents accept the invitation and join the school in a partnership of educating their children. Because of a lack of parental involvement, the staff acting in loco parentis not only prepares children academically but is cognizant of the possible risks of abuse and shortcomings in the home surroundings of the children. The school staff seeks support. University students, social work practicum students, and work experience students from the feeder high school are encouraged to volunteer regularly. Together the staff members engage in actions and interactions that are "directed toward the child's positive being and becoming" (Van Manen, 1991, p. 18).

## **The Informants**

Britney, Laura, Matt, Robbie, and Mari were the foci of this study. They came from diverse backgrounds and had unique interests and needs. Their commonality was being retained in Grade 1. Interspersed throughout the portrayals are anecdotes from the parents, children, and teachers and comments from official report cards that help to create an image of each child. The parents gave permission to share official data from the children's report cards. To maintain confidentiality, each informant was given a pseudonym.

Britney. Determined, cheerful, confident, perfectionist describe one side of Britney. Fragile, hurt, victimized are the other attributes Britney is attempting to understand and resolve. A glimpse of the pain Britney was experiencing was shared when her mother arrived at the classroom one day to pick her daughter up for a therapy session.

## **Teacher: Can I help you?**

Britney's Mother: Yes, I'm Britney's mom. I've come to pick her up early. She has an appointment. We are going to start some therapy again this week. Britney was abused by both her dad and her uncle.

Britney is 7 years old and was born in Edmonton. She has four siblings, a sister who is 5, twin brothers who are 3, and a baby brother who is 1. She began kindergarten in the Catholic system in Edmonton and transferred to a public school in Edmonton for her Grade 1 year. She arrived in Calgary just prior to the beginning of the 1991-92 school year. When her mother registered Britney she said, "She is a very good kid. She keeps to herself quite often. She doesn't like close friends. We had to move a lot to stay away from her dad."

During our third interview on November 28, Britney's mother finally explained the reason for all the different schools:

I was trying to hide the abuse from the teachers. I pulled her out of kindergarten just for that. Just because there was so much abuse. Stupid on my part. I didn't want the school to know. When she was in Grade 1, she had to be in school. There was no way of hiding it and the teachers knew what was going on. It got so bad Britney would just sit in a corner and she wouldn't do anything any more.

The partner living with Britney's mother provided some background about Britney. He commented:

I met Britney's mother last year. She moved into the apartment I was living in. We always worry about Britney and she had to check in after school. Her dad last year really hassled us and we didn't want him touching Britney. We always worried that something would happen to her. She can play outside but she needs to come in and check.

Britney always referred to this partner as "Daddy." Throughout the year he was very supportive of Britney. He remarked:

I can help her. She has a little book bag, a little Crayola book bag. She's not going to lose that-my mom made that for her. I can help her in the morning to remember to bring her library book back.

A couple of days following Christmas, Britney's mother was unsure if Britney would be able to continue coming to school. She walked into the office on Friday morning, January 17, 1992 at 11:00 a.m. and said, "I've got a bond on my house right now and if they don't find him within the next four hours they will be taking us into protective custody." She continued by explaining that Britney's father had received a mistrial and had been seen in Calgary. She said, "I have come to pick up the two girls because I'm afraid he is going to try and take them."

On Monday January 20, 1992, Britney did not come to school. I remember the emptiness I felt. It reinforced for me how little I really knew about Britney. But, Tuesday came and Britney's smiling face appeared and her mother explained:

When I got home I said to my Wally, "Britney used to walk with her head down. She would never look eye to eye. Now that she is going to Grade 2 she is excited about learning." And so, when the police came, I said, "I don't want to pull out. Britney is doing so much better." And I thought, "I'm not going to run. This is too important to Britney." I was willing to take a chance. I told the police we were not going into hiding. Rather, a private detective is watching my kids go to and from the school.

The Grade 1 teacher's comments on a report card this year emphasized Britney's capabilities: "Britney is a co-operative student who enjoys helping others. She volunteers ideas and information during discussions. Her work is completed very well. She takes great pride in it."

Following Christmas vacation, Britney spent half an hour in the Grade 2 classroom. During the first week of February she was in Grade 2 for the morning and Grade 1 in the afternoon. In the first week in March, she moved to the Grade 2 classroom for the entire day.

The confidence Britney's mother recognized continued to grow. Britney's Grade 2 teacher commented at the end of June: "Since her move to Grade 2, Britney has acquired a lot of self-confidence. She sees herself as an active learner.... Britney continues to grow as a reader and writer. She is taking risks and is willing to use personalized spelling."

I do not think I can ever understand the pain and suffering that Britney has endured. She was beginning to share some of her fears in her paint therapy sessions with her teacher. The story shared by Britney's mother also indicated Britney's willingness to continue to believe in people. Her mother reported a conversation between the two of them:

"Mom, I really like Mr. Houn." And I said, "That's good you know, because

I am sure he likes you." She goes, "No, I really like him Mom; he talks to me."

She goes, "I trust him. I get to talk to him and he doesn't tell me to sit down and ignore me."

Laura. Big brown eyes, long dark hair, and a permanent smile are the characteristics that come to mind when I think of Laura. Laura, who is 7 years old, was born in Costa Rica and came to Canada at the age of 2. Her native language is Spanish. At 3, while her mother studied English, she attended a daycare where she was first introduced to English. Laura lives with both her mother and father and has a brother who is 5 years younger.

During the 9 months of waiting for her brother's arrival, Laura's parents were separated. Shortly after her brother's birth, Laura's parents resolved their differences and reunited as a family. During the past year both of Laura's parents were involved with Laura's growth as a learner and were eager to help her.

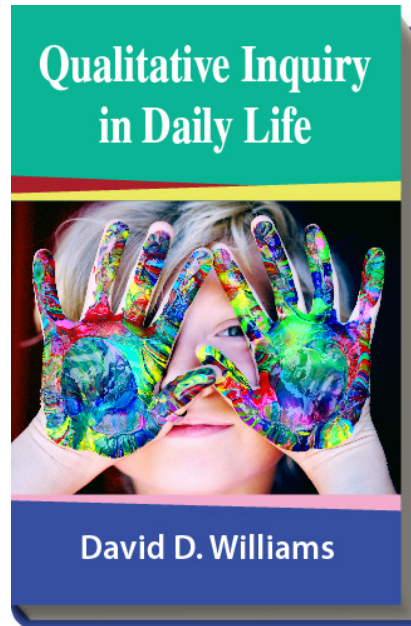
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