

A Knot to Unfurl: A Book Review

Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Education Practice.
Michael F. Connelly & D. Jean Clandinin. London, ON:
Althouse Press, 1999, 184 pages.

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Angela Rokne, a teacher with whom I have had the pleasure of working, talks about her writing in terms of "a knot that needs unfurling." What a wonderful image of a teacher puzzled by something in particular and struggling to explore, understand, and name what interrupts the narrative of her practice. Angela's metaphor applies well to the work of Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin's *Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Education Practice*. The knot in this case is the relationship among teacher identity, knowledge, and context. However, the unfurling does not take place as a reader might expect. There is no delineation of a theoretical framework from which the authors claim to speak, no linear progression through a series of ideas, arguments, or conclusions. Instead the reader encounters "a swarm of biographies and a confusion of histories. There is order in it all of some sort, but it is the order of the squall or a street market, nothing metrical" (p. 116). I struggled with the text for a long time, searching for a particular logic or order. Narrative? Exposition? Collage? I wondered if the text was unsure of its own logic; I wondered what the authors were up to. Clearly I too had a knot to unfurl!

"Shifting Stories to Live By"

Part I of the book, entitled "Teacher Stories, Stories of Teachers, School Stories, Stories of School" presents a series of teachers' and researchers' narratives. Stories range from a principal's experience during his first years at a new school, a teacher's story of pupil-led conferences, to a researcher's story of the roles that physical objects may play in the formation of teachers' identity. The tales presented honor the richness and indeterminacy of educators' experiences, allowing the reader to capture the complexity of teaching. As a reader I felt the joys, pains, and dilemmas of the teacher-authors. The stories seemed to open for conversation much of what lies hidden in a teaching life, for example, the feelings of a teacher, committed to a particular practice, when she or he hears a researcher denigrate that practice. The reader gets a sense of what the narrators care deeply about, what motivates them, the conditions in which they carry out their work day to day, and the dilemmas with which they live. Rich themes of loss, placelessness, fragmentation, difference, and guilt are embedded in the stories. The narratives are not merely representational, but constitute what Aoki (1992) has termed a hermeneutic returning to the lived ground of human experience that allows us to understand how sufficiently we

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inhabit where we already are as teachers. Connelly and Clandinin correctly assert that understanding practice in narrative terms cannot be separated from the development of self and identity. Story amplifies the relationship between what we believe and how we practice.

While I lost myself in the stories presented, I wondered where they were leading me, this procession of narratives. So I began reading Part II of the text, entitled "Reflections on Knowledge, Context, and Identity" with interest. I longed for some analysis of the narratives that had gone before. How did the authors make sense of the narratives in the light of their chosen themes of identity, knowledge, and context?

The major theme explicated in Part II is that of having a "story to live by." Stories to live by provide each person with a "special place and orientation," and "this may be said to constitute an educator's professional identity" (p. 93). A story to live by, according to the authors, provides a narrative thread or plot line that educators draw on to make sense of themselves and their practice. In turn, one's identity sustains the plot line. For example, one nurse educator in the text tells how her own sense of self as an educator is inextricably intertwined with her students' examination success. Another educator speaks to the importance of community in her classroom practice. Connelly and Clandinin conclude that the relationship between identity and curriculum practice is such that when programs and curricula change, teachers lose a sense of themselves. This means that school change is about creating the need for new stories to live by. Teacher resistance reflects an effort to maintain a story to live by in the face of change.

At this point in the section the authors take a reflexive turn to their own stories of becoming teacher educators and researchers. They lay their stories alongside those in the previous section; these musings are compelling as one listens to two renowned educators question the intent, purpose, and value of their educational efforts. Connelly and Clandinin conclude by calling for a more fluid sense of the educational enterprise, one that acknowledges ambiguity and tension. Consequently, the identities of teacher educators, teachers, and researchers are framed as "shifting selves" (p. 131), hovering over an ever-changing educational landscape; there is no *terra firma*, only "floating foundations." Moreover, the authors assert that we must stop educating and researching as if everything will eventually "return to normal and everything will be alright." The section ends with a call for a different sense of order. It seems that we must now educate for "shifting stories to live by" rather than single plot lines that provide a mythical coherence to our experiences as educators.

Part III of the text, "Administrator Stories, Stories of Administrators, System Stories," presents a series of administrators' stories; Part IV, "Reflections on Knowledge, Context and Identity," provides analysis of the same. Although the authors conclude that the tensions and dilemmas for administrators are similar to those experienced by teachers, they also note an absence of administrators' stories to live by. The book concludes with a question that I suspect will fuel the authors' future research: "If the conduit is so pervasive as to fix administrator identities, how might we imagine a system that created pos-

sibilities for alternative and, therefore, possibilities for the formation of different identities?" (p. 175).

Shifting Constructs to Research By?

In the end it was not so much the logic or order of the text that preoccupied me (I concluded that it was some combination of narrative and exposition), but rather what I came to perceive as "ghosts" in the text, to borrow one of the book's own metaphors. The emaciated form of which I speak is the book's theoretical framework. The authors begin with the statement "We had no preset agenda or intellectual framework other than our interest in the interconnectedness of knowledge, context, and identity" (p. 4). This seems to suggest that the authors see agendas or frameworks as relatively negative in their impact: frameworks may narrow possibilities for understanding, or they may unnecessarily fix outcomes. The absence of framework means that authors such as Bakhtin or Ricoeur, who have spoken at length about the relationship between practice and identity, take on a spectral form. There is a vague sense that Connelly and Clandinin are informed by that writing, but such that key constructs remain little more than skeletal in form and substance. The reader is left longing for more in-depth discussion of the theme of the text in the light of the narratives presented. Rather than diminish one's understanding of these stories, an intellectual framework might have enhanced interpretation. Intellectual frameworks, far from providing a fixed description of the phenomenon, should endorse our obligations and allow us to be honest about our particular view, however limited and partial. An intellectual framework discloses the author's interpretation as located and temporal; the reader is thus invited to view the research as a developing story with the potential of being rewritten at any time.

Shaping a Professional Identity builds on the authors' previous work. Readers recognize that Connelly and Clandinin operate from the belief that teaching is experienced as a complex social event and that teachers' knowledge is a type of event-structured knowledge best reflected in narrative form. Although the authors recognize that teachers' stories to live by can be thwarted by the larger conditions of their work in schools, they do not acknowledge explicitly that stories themselves are culturally constituted, even if individually recounted. Plots such as *community* are no coincidence. Cultures do provide specific types of plots for adoption by their members in their configuration of self. Even though lives are unique, they do share the characteristics of dominant plot outlines. This understood, we can begin to question the extent to which educators inherit as well as create many of the stories that they tell about the limits and possibilities of their lives in schools. Moreover, we can begin to understand how individuals can become powerful or powerless depending on the particular plot lines available to them.

In closing, much of what the book offers resonates with me. The stories linger. Have the authors unfurled the knot of identity, knowledge and context? Not quite!

Reference

- Aoki, T. (1992). Layered voices of teaching: The uncannily correct and the elusively true. In W. Pinar & W. Reynolds (Eds.), *Understanding curriculum as phenomenological and deconstructed text*. New York: Teachers College Press.