The Story of "Anna": A Life History Study of the Literacy Beliefs and Teaching Practices of an Urban High School English Teacher

By James A. Muchmore

During the past fifteen years, there has been an increasing interest among educational researchers in understanding the lives of teachers (e.g., Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991)—including the ways they think about their subject matter (Stodolsky, 1988) and curriculum in general (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Important in this work is an emphasis on understanding teachers' thinking from *their* perspective—from the perspective of an *insider* looking around, and not from that of an *outsider* looking in. Such an emphasis has resulted in an increase in the use of life history and narrative approaches in studies of teacher thinking and teacher socialization (see, e.g., Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Elbaz, 1991; Goodson, 1992).

James A. Muchmore is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at the College of Education, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

In line with this kind of research, for five years (1992-1997) I was involved in a collaborative research relationship with an experienced high school English teacher named "Anna Henson" (a pseudonym). Utilizing a life history approach, I explored

the history and evolution of Anna's beliefs about literacy, and how these beliefs had shaped her teaching practices throughout her career.

Background of the Study

I first met Anna in the summer of 1990 when we were both enrolled in a graduate course at The University of Michigan. At that time, Anna was a part-time doctoral student as well as a full-time teacher at "Windrow High School" (a pseudonym) in urban Detroit. Windrow was a comprehensive high school with an enrollment of approximately 2400 students, 99.5 percent of whom were African American. With twenty-five years as a classroom teacher, Anna always exuded a quiet confidence in her teaching—and whenever she talked about her classroom, I never sensed any of the underlying dissatisfactions and frustrations that I had sometimes experienced during the time that I was a public school teacher. As I got to know Anna, I gradually found myself wondering how she had gotten to this point in her career. What were her beliefs about literacy? What did she do in her classroom? To what extent were her beliefs and practices related? How had this relationship been mediated by the contexts that she had experienced throughout her career? What kinds of pedagogical decisions had she made in response to such contexts? These are some of the questions that drove my study.

Methods

Ever since researchers in the field of reading first became interested in exploring the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices in the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Barr & Duffy, 1978; Buike & Duffy, 1979; DeFord, 1985; Duffy, 1981; Hoffman & Kugle, 1982), survey-type instruments have been a common way to study teacher thinking. In fact, one of the more popular instruments, DeFord's (1985) "Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile" (TORP), is still widely used by researchers who wish to characterize teachers' beliefs about reading (e.g., Evans, 1995; Ketner, Smith, & Parness, 1997; Morison et al., 1997; Sacks & Mergendoller, 1997). I believe there are at least two significant shortcomings in using these kinds of instruments.

First, survey instruments tend to mute the voices of teachers by separating their beliefs from their lived experiences. Beliefs do not exist in a vacuum. They are formulated and are held by particular people in particular contexts—people who live and breathe, and have personal histories and future aspirations. All teachers possess life stories in which their thoughts and actions are situated, yet survey instruments such as DeFord's (1985) regularly filter out this rich and important context, leaving only the disembodied responses to a series of propositional statements.

Second, survey studies tend to encourage top-down models of change—offering well-intended policy prescriptions that may unwittingly undermine teacher

agency and erode their sense of professionalism. Because survey studies often deal with sizable populations and are more concerned with overarching trends than with individual cases, they are typically used to produce knowledge of a formally generalizable variety that is then forcefully applied to other teachers in other situations. This kind of "professional development" too often takes the form of top-down administrative mandates which view teachers as subservient technicians hired primarily to implement beaurocratically-sanctioned policies and procedures.

My study with Anna represents an alternative approach to studying teacher thinking. Instead of relying upon surveys and questionnaires, I utilized a series of personal observations, one-on-one conversations, and other interactions with a single teacher conducted over an extended period of time. Characterized by an ethic of caring and sensitivity to the lives of teachers, my research is consistent with the narrative work done by Clandinin and Connelly (1986, 1987), Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990), Elbaz (1983), Schubert and Ayers (1992), and others.

Specifically, my study utilized life history and ethnographic methods (e.g., Denzin, 1989a, 1989b, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; Van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1995). In order to learn about Anna's beliefs and practices, I conducted 10 formal interviews with Anna, plus dozens of informal conversations. I also made more than 50 visits to her classroom in Detroit, assuming the role of a participant observer and recording field notes. In addition, under Anna's direction, I spoke with many of her friends, relatives, colleagues, and past and present students—all of whom were familiar, to varying degrees, with her teaching practices and her thinking about literacy. Another source of information included a collection of 19 academic papers that she had written for college courses throughout her career, in which she regularly discussed issues related to literacy and teaching. Finally, she provided me with copies of various professional documents—including newspaper clippings about her, past and present evaluations of her teaching conducted by various school administrators, and other professional documents. Taken together, all of this information enabled me to construct an in-depth narrative portrait of Anna's life as a teacher, with a particular focus on the evolution of her beliefs and practices.

Walking an Ethical Tightrope

Unlike traditional educational research, in which relationships between researchers and participants are characterized by business-like transactions that rarely extend into the realm of the personal, life history and ethnographic approaches can involve relationships that are personal and very complex. As such, there is no set of hard and fast rules for ensuring ethical behavior in this kind of research (see, e.g., Cassell, 1982, Lincoln, 1990, Magolda & Robinson, 1993, Measor & Sikes, 1992, Punch, 1994). Instead, there are only guiding principles.

Anna and I began our collaboration as friends and colleagues—and because our pre-existing friendship was based on ideals of honesty, parity, trust, and mutual

respect, it was only natural that our research relationship included these same principles. Anna was involved in every phase of the project, and we were fortunate to have never experienced any great rifts in our friendship. Nevertheless, someone once asked me, "What if you had discovered during your research that you no longer liked Anna as a person? What if she had turned out to be completely different from the person you thought she was? What would you have done?" Intrigued by this question, I responded that it definitely would have changed my research—and perhaps even ended it. I am certain that if Anna had suddenly made this same kind of realization about me, then she would definitely have ended it. Even if we had been able to work through such a problem, it certainly would have changed the tenor of our relationship. It would have been much more difficult for me to write about Anna and share my work with her if I did not like her as a person.

In agreeing to collaborate with me in a study of her beliefs and practices, Anna made herself vulnerable to several levels of potential harm against which I felt ethically obliged to protect her. It was conceivable, for example, that my research could have undermined her relationship with her students, created dissension among her colleagues, or even caused her to lose her job. Throughout our work together, I therefore attempted to minimize the potential for these kinds of harm. On the first day of school, I introduced myself to each of her classes, telling them exactly who I was and why I was there. I also carefully explained my research to any of Anna's colleagues who inquired about my presence at Windrow High School. I viewed myself as a kind of guest at Windrow, and I made every effort to treat my hosts—the students, the faculty, and the administration—with dignity and respect.

However, as Cassell (1982) notes, harm in qualitative research is most likely to occur not in the course of daily interactions between the research participants, but in the course of writing and dissemination. For example, when I interpret Anna's life, I may do so with great respect and responsibility, but once my work is published, I have little control over how someone else might interpret or use it. People come to texts with all kinds of prior conceptions and personal agendas, and they may inadvertently (or purposely) cause harm or discomfort to Anna. It is possible, for instance, that she may be unfairly criticized—or she may be lauded as an exemplary teacher, which is one outcome that she particularly wanted to avoid. She made it clear that she did not want to be held up as an exemplar, and I tried not to present her in that way. However, my good intentions will do little to prevent other people from holding her up as an exemplar.

To mitigate these kinds of risk, Anna and I decided to use a pseudonym instead of her real name. Even though it may be a thin disguise for her real identity, just by having a pseudonym we felt that we would be sending the implicit message to anyone who reads my work that Anna was not seeking attention—and we believed that readers would then have an ethical responsibility to honor her desire to remain anonymous. While this stance may afford Anna some degree of protection from outsiders, we knew that the use of a pseudonym would offer little protection to Anna,

her students, or her colleagues from knowledgeable insiders. Colleagues, administrators, and other school personnel will know exactly who she is, no matter how well we try to protect her identity. Therefore, I depended greatly upon Anna herself to help minimize this risk. Because she knew the people and the politics of her work environment much better than I did, I relied upon her to critically read my work and tell me when she felt something was problematic.

Anna's Story

Reading and writing always played an important role in Anna's life. Growing up in a rural community in Southeastern Michigan, she was always surrounded by adults who valued literacy. "I learned to write before I even went to school," she said.

> I remember writing, sitting alongside my father when he was in graduate school and I was in kindergarten and modeling with nonsense words, copying things. And there would be quiet times in the evening where I would sit with a book or magazine at three and four before I could read, just to be with the adults.

Anna described her household as being fairly typical of white middle class America in the post-World War II era. It was a close knit family with four children — three boys and one girl. Both of her parents came from immigrant families, and her grandparents lived next door. The only thing that she considered to be unusual was the fact that her mother's parents could not read or write. "School wasn't any part of their experience," she said.

> They had left the Old Country — Poland and Russia — and come to this country and started to work at the Ford Motor Company. They got to be middle class people by virtue of work, not education.... They understood the value of education, but from a very different point of view than the people around me who took education for granted.

Anna fondly remembered the role that her mother played in helping her grandparents to communicate with their relatives still living in Europe.

> [My mother] was always writing letters for them to the Old Country and reading the letters that came. She was bilingual. She could speak both English and Polish and some German, and she would translate the letters. Those would be events. We would sit around the table, and Grandma and Grandpa would come. We would picture the lives of these people we'd never met and probably never would.

Anna's early interest in reading and writing was reinforced by her school experiences. "In grade school, I had exceptional language arts teachers," she remembered. "As I look back now we did a lot of reading, and we were encouraged to read and write outside the class." Anna attended a small Catholic school that was run by four nuns, each of whom taught two classes with mixed grades. "Having two grades in one room," she explained, "you always knew what to anticipate for the

next year because you saw exactly what was going to happen. And I was a kid who was a fast finisher, always eager to move on to the next reader."

Anna continued her interest in academic pursuits as a student at a small, private high school for girls. Within this environment, she found it relatively easy to establish friendships with other students who shared her scholarly interests.

> I remember having what I would consider pseudo-intellectual conversations about issues, such as when Kennedy was a candidate, and when the Beatles were a big deal. It was also a Catholic institution, and there were a lot of changes going on in the Church at that time, so I had some awareness of a bigger world, which has been useful to me. I think my mind was opened rather early to other possibilities.

Anna also credited her parents—her father in particular—with instilling in her a sense of critical inquisitiveness about the world, and a sense of social responsibility. Her father was an attorney whom she described as being "a practical man"—someone for whom practicing law was more of a means for social benefit than a means for personal enrichment. "He was a strong people's advocate and did things that I can admire now, but which I didn't understand as a youngster. We didn't get rich and famous," she said with a laugh. Further describing her father, she said:

> He didn't see law as a way to self-promote. He was always very proud of being a Democrat in a Republican town and being one of the few Democrats in his Republican law school class. He had a very populist sense and a very pragmatic sense of what an education meant. He knew that he was providing better for his family than his father had been able to do. But he was never interested in social mobility. In fact, he would often introduce himself to people as a farmer.

College

After graduating from high school in 1964, Anna enrolled at Michigan State University. There, she hoped to encounter a thriving community of scholars—people with whom she could share and expand her intellectual interests. What she found, however, was very different. "I was surprised that students weren't as serious-minded as I thought they were going to be," she said.

> I had anticipated college as being kind of like high school but just more intense. Yet when I got there, I found that I had to really seek out people who were interested in academics. That puzzled me. I was really disoriented for a while.

Anna gradually overcome this feeling of isolation and confusion by pursuing extracurricular activities that involved reading and writing. She served as an editor for the literary magazine; she attended poetry readings; and she actively sought out professors and other individuals who shared in her passion for the written word.

During this time, Anna's career options wavered among several professions, including teaching and journalism. "I knew in elementary school that teaching was important to me," she said.

> But I also knew that writing was something I wanted to do. I had considered journalism but wasn't sure that I liked that kind of writing. I didn't like writing under pressure. Writing was always a leisure sort of activity for me. It was something I enjoyed doing slowly, deliberately. And having worked on school newspapers and such, I knew that journalism was a pressure situation. I didn't like that kind of writing.

Anna ultimately decided to become a teacher, although she explained that her decision was motivated more by pragmatic concerns than by any special calling that she felt to the profession.

> I had started school as just a liberal arts major—an English major—and I wasn't in the teaching track and didn't begin to take education courses until my junior year. I think it was a question of wanting to support myself.... I wanted to be independent, so teaching was a practical move so I could be financially independent.

After committing herself to this career choice, Anna decided that she wanted to do her student teaching in Detroit. "I knew I wanted to work in a city," she explained. "I didn't want small-town living.... I thought of the city as an important place where all the world's work was done." Having recently read Daniel Fader's *Hooked on Books* (1966), Anna hoped to student teach at Northwestern High School, which was one of the schools that Fader mentioned in his book. However, this placement never materialized. "I don't know how the assignments were made, but I was sent to Windrow instead. I was disappointed at first, but then I met my supervising teacher—and I was delighted with the school."

Windrow in the 1960s

Windrow was still relatively new in 1967 when Anna did her student teaching. Built a decade earlier as a small neighborhood school with an initial enrollment of approximately 900 students, it had been expanded in the early 1960s to meet the needs of a growing community. By 1967, Windrow's enrollment had almost tripled. With more than 3000 students and 130 teachers, it had become one of the largest high schools in the city, and was widely regarded as a model institution. The *Report of Findings and Recommendations of the Detroit High School Study* (High School Study Commission, 1967) called the building "an excellent example of a well-constructed school edifice" (p. 7). At that time, it served a predominantly white, middle class community with approximately three percent of the students being African American. Sixty-eight percent of the 1967 graduates applied to college, up from 52 percent in 1960, and the report praised the faculty for their excellent work—especially in the areas of math, English, science, and music. In addition, race relations were reported to be excellent, with African-American students and members of ethnic minorities being well-integrated into the school community. Their achievement patterns, it stated, mirrored those of the larger student body.

In many ways, the scenario at Windrow in the 1960s represented the calm before the storm. By 1967, some Detroit schools were experiencing the racial tensions that

had gripped the nation at large. In April, 1966, for instance, there was a massive student protest at Northern High School. More than 2,300 students at the predominantly African-American school staged a walkout in protest of the principal's decision to ban the publication of an editorial in the school newspaper which criticized poor learning conditions in the school (Plofchan, 1966)

Shortly after this protest, the *Detrot Free Press* published a scathing exposé on the poor conditions in other Detroit public schools. Sending one of its reporters into a predominantly African-American junior high school under the guise of being a substitute teacher, the *Free Press* printed a four-part story that told of crumbling buildings, shortages of books, and teacher indifference (Treloar, 1966a, 1966b, 1966c, 1966d). In describing the classroom to which he was assigned, the reporter wrote:

> There was a wad of gum stuck on the blackboard. In one corner, paint flaked off the ceiling. Later, students would sit very still and watch the pieces drift down and land on their shoulders and in their hair, artificial dandruff.
>
> I don't know how old the desks were, but there must have been two generations of initials etched into the unvarnished tops. Each desk had a hole for an inkwell, and those were going out of date when I was in school.
>
> There's a dark little courtyard just outside the window with iron gratings everywhere. In the middle sat a cement something where trash was thrown.
>
> Miss Schaal (the head of the English department) saw me looking out the window. "We had lovely curtains to cover the window, but the last teacher in this room took them. She only lasted five months." (Teloar, 1966a, p. 1A)

In a later installment, the reporter elaborated on the negative attitude that permeated the teaching staff:

> Instead of dealing with the problem of attitudes, a third to a half of Jefferson's teachers have rejected their students as "uneducable."
>
> For the new teachers fresh out of college, there is plenty of encouragement to "give up."
>
> When he doesn't do well on the first few days, there are embittered teachers on every side ready to tell him: "These kids are just plain dumb. You will never teach them anything...."
>
> Friday morning, my last day at Jefferson, I walked up the front steps with one of the new teachers, a young man just graduated from Michigan State University.
>
> I asked him how he felt after his first week in a new profession.
>
> "It's one week toward retirement," he shrugged. (Treloar, 1966c, pp. 1A, 8A)

The incident at Northern, followed by this shocking series of newspaper articles, highlighted the poor quality of education that was afforded to minority students in Detroit. They also highlighted the racial tensions that had long existed within the city, and, in retrospect, perhaps foreshadowed the massive riot that consumed Detroit in the summer of 1967.

Student Teaching at Windrow

As parts of Detroit burned in 1967, the neighborhoods surrounding Windrow were largely unaffected. There were no lootings, no arrests, and no injuries or deaths. Life immediately after the riot continued much as it had before. During the next several years, however, there was a notable rise in the white flight to the suburbs that had begun in the 1950s. In 1946, for example, more than 80 percent of the students in the city's schools were white, while by 1967 this percentage had dwindled to 40. Eight years later it was less than 23 percent (Mirel, 1993). The statistics at Windrow followed this general trend during the 1970s and 1980s, although the school was almost entirely unintegrated before 1970.

The setting in which Anna did her student teaching was the pre-1970 version of Windrow High School. Working with a mentor teacher whom she described as being "traditional" in her pedagogy, Anna taught two tenth-grade English classes and received a good evaluation. "Miss Henson is most pleasant and cooperative," wrote her cooperating teacher on the official evaluation form. "...I have the highest regard for (her) personal and professional qualities. She does not resist criticism and shows genuine interest and concern for her students. I believe she will be a fine teacher."

After graduating from Michigan State University, Anna interviewed for several teaching positions in Detroit and nearby Lansing—but had difficulty finding a job. "This was in the late '60s when the profession was pretty much saturated," she explained. Eventually, she was hired as a substitute teacher in Lansing.

Beginning Teacher

While living and working in Lansing, Anna received an unexpected job offer from the Detroit Public Schools—teaching English to seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders. She jumped at this opportunity and reported to work on the Monday before Thanksgiving in 1969. By all accounts, however, this was a very difficult experience for Anna. The teacher whom she replaced was an alcoholic who had been released for drinking on the job, and the classroom she inherited was in a state of utter chaos. "I remember asking the principal if he at least had a list of names, so that I'd have a place to begin," she said. "But he said 'no.' He just walked me to the classroom and closed the door. I will never forget that."

For Anna, teaching at Franklin Junior High was not at all like student teaching at Windrow—or subbing in Lansing. Instead, it was much more similar to the experience that Treloar (1966a, 1966b, 1966c, 1966d) had described in his series of articles in the *Detroit Free Press*. Anna explained it as follows:

> Franklin was in a state of transition. When I got there, it was no longer a school that had lots of parental support and a strong staff with strong leadership. New teachers were starting to come in, while the experienced ones were leaving. They were simply

> not ready for the kinds of things that they were beginning to see in the classroom. And, typical of a school in transition, the leadership began to retire, so we just didn't get the right kind of support. There was this sort of flailing around looking for ways to keep going.... By the time I left the school seven years later, 95 percent of the staff had changed. That's an amazing turnover.

One of Anna's colleagues at this school remembered Anna as a teacher who got off to a very rough start—an assessment with which Anna readily agreed:

> I had so much trouble at first. And I was so disappointed. I was young and enthusiastic and couldn't wait to get into the classroom—and then to have all of this resistance addressed at me personally was extremely disappointing.... The kids were vicious—the things they wrote and the things they said. I remember that there was just this overwhelming sense that I wasn't wanted there, and nowhere in my wildest imagination had I ever pictured myself being the object of that kind of hostility.... I mean rowdiness and that kind of thing I was ready for, but I was totally unprepared for these kinds of personal attacks. Sometimes, I'd stay out in the parking lot for a half hour in tears before I could drive home, wondering how in the world I was going to walk back in there the next day with any kind of dignity.

Anna told this story with a faint smile on her face, as if she could hardly believe her own inexperience, and she was very frank in discussing her shortcomings. "Part of the problem," she explained, "was that I kept appealing to the whole class."

> I can say now, with some experience, that I wasn't looking at the class as a group of individuals, except for the tormentors, except for the leaders. And at the same time, I was ignoring the other kids who would have been great allies. I just kept appealing to the whole class....

With the help of some of her colleagues, Anna was gradually able to move beyond this rough beginning and establish a niche for herself at Franklin, much as she had done in college. "Things did pick up," she said, "thanks to the support of people who saw that I was in trouble and cared enough about the kids and about me to help." Indeed, Anna's first-year performance evaluation, which was a simple checklist completed by her principal, contained "good" or "superior" ratings in every category.

Anna, however, was not satisfied. In searching for solutions to the problems that she encountered in her classroom, she enrolled in graduate school at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and began to work on a Master of Arts degree in education. In explaining her thinking at the time, she said:

> My expectations of students when I started teaching were very traditional. I thought that I was responsible for bringing the work to them, that they were to take in all the things that I had been prepared to teach. Of course, that fell apart really quickly. Nothing that I learned in my teacher education program prepared me for kids who didn't read, couldn't read, and were struggling with the simplest tasks in writing—like writing names. I didn't see how anything I was prepared to do fit the requirements of the job. So that lack of fit made me begin to question and draw from other

> resources for how to do this, how to make this work. My initial conflict was something that drove me back to school.... I thought that there must be some way an M.A. in education would answer some questions for me on things that I wasn't getting help with within the system.

One of Anna's professors remembered her as being a quiet student. It wasn't that she didn't participate," he explained to me during an interview.

> But she had a kind of held back, soft, reserved demeanor that made it necessary for me as a teacher to draw her out. And already, it was my practice in those days to get to know the stories of my students, get a sense of who they were, what their major life concerns were as well as their more academic interests. So, it soon became clear to me that Anna was deeply involved in her teaching of English, that she cared a lot about her students, but she was quite diffident about her ability to reach them.

One problem was that Anna felt trapped by the official English curriculum at Franklin Junior High, which consisted primarily of the *Robert's English* textbook (Roberts, 1968) with a heavy emphasis on transformational grammar. On one hand, she felt obligated to follow this curriculum, while on the other hand, she knew it was not working. "I knew that kids sitting with that old *Roberts English Series* book in seventh and eighth grade and writing out those transformational grammar sentences was not (productive)," she said.

> [The book] had nothing to do with the students. It had very little to do with me. The writing that the students were doing was just reproducing what was in the textbooks, completely remote from their lives. They had little interest in writing it, and I had little interest in reading it, so we weren't making any connection at all.

Nevertheless, Anna continued to receive favorable evaluations by her supervisors. A second-year evaluation conducted by her Department Head included the following narrative description of one of her lessons:

> Two pictures, each containing many errors and discrepancies, were projected on the overhead projector. Pupils were to list at least five errors for each. Discussion revealed that not all students had the same answers since people see things differently. The last few minutes of the class were spent with crossword puzzles.

The Department Head also noted that Anna had difficulty in getting the students to cooperate during the discussion, but he praised her efforts nonetheless.

> Miss Henson tried hard to get students to participate in an orderly manner in the discussion. Unfortunately, many have not yet learned to raise their hands and be recognized. I find this typical of many of our students and I do not feel that this is because of any negligence on Miss Henson's part.

Each year, Anna's official evaluations became more and more complimentary of her teaching, showing a steady progression in her performance — at least as it was perceived by her supervisors. Her third-year evaluation stated that Anna "began the

class promptly after the tardy bell," and instructed her students to silently read the explanatory material while she took attendance. Continuing, it said:

> The several students who were tardy were quickly and quietly given their instructions with a minimum of disturbance to the rest of the class. When Miss Henson began to work orally with the class, most students were attentive and seemed to get the point of the lesson.

By now, Anna had begun to move beyond the confines of the official school curriculum, with its emphasis on transformational grammar, and she began to design her own curriculum around the needs and interests of her students. She said:

> I began to draw on more community resource type things. I worked with the *Bulletin Spirits* program and brought bulletins to my classroom. We (the students) did writing in the bulletin; we made little books; we did all that stuff that whole language is describing now. We were doing this then. I took lots of pictures of the kids and activities in the classroom and then asked them to think about them and write about that.... It was essentially a combined curriculum—the things the school provided and the things I was trying to provide.

In spite of her apparent successes as a teacher, deep inside, Anna remained dissatisfied with the job that she was doing and seriously considered pursuing another career. "I thought I probably wasn't going to be a very effective teacher and that if I wanted to do something useful, then I should think about getting out of the classroom," she said. "But I was mostly burned out. I didn't feel like I had the energy or the resources left. Even though I could figure out ways of making it work, I couldn't see myself doing this for another 20 years."

Anna taught at Franklin Junior High for a few more years before finally making a radical career change. Taking a leave of absence from her job, she abruptly moved across the country to Oregon and enrolled in graduate school at Portland State University. In explaining her rationale behind this decision, Anna said that she did not leave her job because she was particularly unhappy at that time in her career. "It's just that I was getting completely overwhelmed by the kinds of problems that kids were bringing to school," she said. "I simply knew that I needed to get away and needed time to think, and I thought that a different place would help me to make some decisions—away from school, away from family.

Taking a one-year sabbatical from teaching and re-enrolling in graduate school—this time away from the familiar setting of Michigan in which she had spent her entire life—she was able to fully immerse herself in the kinds of scholarly activities that had always appealed to her. She grew a great deal during this time, both personally and professionally. "That was a really valuable year in a lot of ways," she said. "I studied American Literature and did quite a bit of thinking about teaching, and I came back with resolve that that was what I wanted to do." Although Anna had gone to Oregon with no firm commitment to return to Michigan, she soon decided that Portland was not the kind of city where she wanted to live permanently.

"Portland seemed to be about twenty years behind the rest of the country," she explained.

> It was not a very progressive place politically. The pace was so different (from Detroit), and I wasn't particularly comfortable there.... So I wrote back to Detroit and told the personnel director that if he could find me a high school English position, I'd be happy to come back.

Return to Windrow

Coincidentally, there happened to be an opening at Windrow High School, the same school where she had student-taught ten years earlier. The school, however, had undergone many changes. In fact, the entire city had changed. The 1970s was a tumultuous decade for Detroit (Mirel, 1993). Between 1970 and the 1980, it lost more than one-fifth of its population, as white middle class families steadily fled to the surrounding suburbs. Businesses, too, deserted the city at an alarming rate, which further drained the already-diminished tax base upon which the schools depended for their funding. Thus, teachers found themselves in the unenviable position of encountering an increasing number of poor and minority students while their resources were simultaneously diminishing. By 1977, when Anna returned to Windrow, almost three-quarters of the students were African American. Nine years later, it was totally segregated, with virtually no white students remaining.

In spite of the turmoil associated with this transition, Anna began her new job at Windrow with a great deal of enthusiasm. "I thought after seven years of making due at Franklin—just trying to get by—I was finally going to be able to do all those things that they taught me about in college," she said. "I was going to present the curriculum, the college-bound curriculum. Wrong!" Her excitement quickly faded when she discovered that not one of her classes was in the college-bound track. "My first semester at Windrow, I had five remedial classes," she said. "They were RC classes, which meant 'Reading Comprehension.' It was a dry compensatory reading program that included lots of pages—lots of standing at the ditto machine, which is something that I absolutely refused to do."

Just as she had done at Franklin, Anna began to look for ways to transcend the prescribed curriculum to which she felt bound, and she turned to writing as a way to engage her students. "We spent more class time writing than we did reading—and working from their texts," she explained. She also turned to the students themselves and listened to their concerns.

> I started looking at what kids cared about when they came to class, and it usually had nothing to do with how creative my dittos were or what wonderful magazines I was bringing in. It had to do with each other. They cared about who was showing up each day. How that had escaped me all those years, I'll never know, but the kids were interested in the kids. But it never said that in any textbook. No one had ever told me that this was the kind of thing I should be looking at or working toward—creating

some kind of cohesiveness among the group and trying to get the students to create the need to be there for each other.

During one of our tape-recorded interviews, Anna explained how this realization gradually transformed her teaching.

> We had a core group of kids—Jason, Robert, Mary, Duane.... I'll never forget those kids. They were so good to each other—so supportive. And I was simply honest with them that I didn't know exactly what we were going to do—only that we were going to try to work toward making the class enjoyable. I said, "You guys help me figure out how to do that.'" And they were so creative and so original and so ambitious for each other in the kinds of things they suggested. They started telling me things like, "We need to talk. We need to have discussions in class about what we care about."
>
> "Okay," I said, "you guys set this up. How are you going to do it? Who's in charge?" And I just sat back and let it happen and watched these kids start creating a class in a way that I had never been able to do. And there was this shift from my taking the whole responsibility for planning, for making it work, for content, for doing the things that I felt the teacher was being paid to do, to this sort of sharing the responsibility for making things work. And, believe it or not, things started to work. We brought their lives into the classroom...and that has been an unforgettable class for me because they taught me my shortcomings as a planner.
>
> Those kids stayed with me a year, and they seemed to almost adopt me as a teacher. They were very sensitive to my need for them to be successful in order for me to be satisfied somehow with the way things were working. And we could have these very candid conversations about why schools didn't work and why had they not been successful before. These were really bright kids, and here they were in this remedial class prepared to be put down, prepared to put each other down, but they somehow pulled together to show me that they could do things.
>
> They were there every day. Their attendance didn't look anything like the attendance for my other remedial classes. Their grades didn't look anything like the grades for the other classes. You know, if a kid's not coming, there goes the grade! You simply have no other choice because attendance influences everything. There's also no cohesiveness in the class when the students aren't coming on a regular basis. There's no sense of community. And I have to say that this was the first class that I ever taught where I could characterize the group as having some communal sense, some sense of shared responsibility for one another. And we kept that. I was fortunate enough to have a number of these students back in the eleventh grade—this time in an Honor's class. They had worked their way out of the remedial track.

In telling this story, Anna emphasized that it took many more years for her to gain the ability and confidence to foster this kind of climate in her other classes. The transformation was gradual, she said, with this particular experience simply providing her with a glimpse into what a classroom might become—an ideal for which to strive.

Anna's Underlying Beliefs about Literacy

Instead of using a survey instrument to deduce and describe Anna's beliefs

about literacy, I utilized inductive methods described by Erickson (1986) and Denzin (1989b). This means that I read all of the textual artifacts—including interview transcripts, field notes, past papers, and other artifacts—as soon as they were collected, and thematically categorized passages that dealt with any aspect of Anna's stated or implicit beliefs about literacy. I then continually altered and adjusted these categories until I was satisfied that they completely accounted for all of the information at hand.

Most of Anna's beliefs about literacy stemmed from her personal life experiences, and from her career-long observations of children and how they learn—rather than directly from formal theories of literacy. I do not mean to imply, however, that Anna discounted such theories. She had always been a serious reader and a scholar. Early in her career, she was somewhat influenced by the perspectives that were put forth in her college courses and which were also expounded in the research literature of the day, but I discovered that many of these beliefs were superficial and short-lived. She discarded them rather quickly after trying to put them into practice and not being satisfied with the results. For example, as a beginning teacher, Anna readily accepted the notion that literacy was synonymous with the mastery of skills. At that time, in late 1960s and early 1970s, mastery learning and skills-based instruction were the dominant approaches in the teaching of reading, and she felt obliged to use them in her classroom. She said:

> There was this notion that if you could master syllables, then you'd understand words...and once you knew words, you'd know sentences...and once you knew sentences, you'd build paragraphs. But real reading doesn't occur that way, and writing doesn't either.

When Anna was a preservice teacher and throughout much of her later career, the standard view of literacy focused solely on reading, with writing being almost totally ignored. "Writing was something that everyone assumed you could either do or you couldn't do," she explained.

> It wasn't a question of learning how to do it better. You either had the talent for it or you didn't. We know so much more now about how students acquire writing and how they build writing skills, but that was something that my methods classes didn't prepare me for at all. We concentrated on reading, exclusively.

When Anna did have her students write in those initial years, her approach tended to be methodical and formulaic. "Early on," she said, "my expectations were very traditional. Everybody needed to know how to write a business letter, how to distinguish a personal letter from a business letter—the textbook approach to genre." The entire emphasis was on the mastery of form; the content and the purpose of the writing were virtually irrelevant.

In contrast, as an experienced teacher, Anna believed in the importance of emphasizing the utilitarian value of literacy. "When students have something to say and a reason to communicate," she said, "they can write very efficiently and

effectively." Anna knew from her own life experiences—from her parents and her grandparents—that reading and writing were practical tools for communication, not ends unto themselves. However, she did not initially draw a connection between this knowledge and her classroom practices. Anna explained:

> At first, I wasn't paying attention to any of the things that students were trying to communicate. That wasn't even important to the lesson. The worksheets—if you got the '-ing' in the right place, or if you put the '-ed' where it was supposed to go, if you understood the singular or past tense, plurals with no 's,' then you knew how to do things. That's what was important Forget that you might have a really compelling story to tell. Forget that there was anything important to say.

In the real world of Anna's parents and grandparents, reading and writing were important because they served useful roles in their lives. The letters that her mother read and composed brought the family together and enabled them to imagine the lives of those who remained in the "Old Country." Although Anna knew the power of stories in her own life, she did not initially value them as a teaching tool—which is not surprising, given the emphasis of her college courses. "All through my college education," she said, "story-telling and narrative weren't valued very highly."

> We weren't taught any ways of using children's own lives, for example, in an English curriculum. It was always how to present some canonical piece, all the books that had been prescribed over the years that were deemed important. That's what we needed to know. So, when I left college, that's virtually all I knew, except for my own stories.

One of Anna's most fundamental beliefs about literacy—one which greatly influenced what she did in her classroom during the time of my visits—was the idea that reading and writing were an important means for self-discovery. In one of our interviews, she remarked, "I think that deciding who we are and what we think is pretty important.... Kids should be encouraged to grow in their own direction and learn who they are. The time we spend talking, reading, and writing should be guided by that notion." Anna held this belief throughout much of her life. In 1975, she wrote a paper for a college course that expressed the same sentiment. "In terms of philosophy," she wrote, "my ultimate concern is knowing oneself. Writing allows an individual a maximum awareness of his own being in relationship to other individuals and experiences." However, this belief was generally unsupported by her experiences as a preservice teacher.

Closely related to Anna's perception of literacy as a tool for self-reflection was the idea that students should be encouraged to choose their own topics and evaluate their own work. Regarding the issue of topic choice, she explained:

> I'm more and more strongly convinced that the students have to generate their own ideas. That business of assigned topics is sort of a power play on the part of teachers to maintain control over the writing process. I think there are ways to explore things that students may know about without my being the presenter of those ideas and those forms.

Anna said that she always felt this way—even as a young teacher. "Early on," she explained, "I probably always felt that students should choose their own topics. I don't remember it being an issue or a problem. Having to think up things to write about is such an integral part of being a writer." Anna had long been guided by the notion that writing in school should be modeled after writing in the "real world," and this idea influenced her feeling about the importance of self-evaluation. She said, "Again, it's modeled on real world writing, where the first person who judges what you are saying is you. You are always the first reader of your writing."

In conclusion, Anna's beliefs about literacy can be placed into two main subcategories. On the one hand, there were temporary beliefs that arose primarily through her university experiences as a preservice teacher—while on the other hand, there were longstanding, permanent beliefs that were deeply rooted in her personal life experiences. And, when these two kinds of beliefs clashed, it was always the latter which ultimately prevailed.

Learning from Anna's Story

Although an in-depth life history study of the beliefs and practices of a single teacher has little value for making generalizations about other teachers in a statistical sense, it can be extremely useful as a vehicle for elaborating an understanding of one's own beliefs and practices. Donmoyer (1990) makes a compelling argument for expanding the notion of generalizability to include the learning that people experience when they read about single cases. As a beginning teacher, for example, I would have greatly valued reading narrative accounts of others teachers who had struggled through situations similar to my own—if for no other reason than simply to have known that I was not alone. Teaching is a solitary profession in which practitioners have limited opportunities to interact with their colleagues. As a teacher, I sometimes went for days—and even weeks—without ever having significant interactions with other adults. Within this isolated existence, reading narrative accounts of other teachers' experiences would have been at least one way that I could have overcome my feelings of isolation.

Narrative accounts of teachers' lives and careers can also serve as tools for self-reflection. By telling Anna's story I hope to provide readers with a tool for reflecting upon their own beliefs and practices. By actively weighing Anna's experiences against their own evolving life stories, readers may gain deeper insights into the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that shape their own teaching and research practices. Engaging in this kind of self-reflection has been shown to be an essential part of teachers' professional growth and development (see, e.g., Cole & Knowles, et al., 2000; Dick, 1993; Ebbs, 1995/1996; Gustafson, 1993/1995; Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Knowles, 1993; Koive-Rybicki, 1995/1996; Smith, 1993; Tann, 1993; Winikates, 1995/1996).

An indepth study of a single teacher can also be used to build theory. For

example, some researchers have a tendency to view teachers' beliefs as uni-dimensional and interchangeable entities, that can be influenced through direct or indirect interventions (e.g., Bednar, 1993; Ginns & Watters, 1990; Laurenson, 1995; Lubinski, Otto, Rich, & Jaberg, 1995; Ojanen, 1993; Rueda & Garcia, 1994). The goal of such researchers, it seems, is to *change* the thinking of teachers in some way—a goal which they readily admit is extremely difficult to achieve. From my study with Anna, there emerges a theory which may help to explain this difficulty. Perhaps beliefs are not uni-dimensional and interchangeable. Perhaps they exist on varying levels. For example, Anna's beliefs seemed to fall into two broad categories, defined largely on the basis of their usefulness and longevity. On the one hand, there were temporary beliefs that arose primarily through her childhood experiences in school and her university experiences as a preservice teacher. These beliefs proved dysfunctional when she tried to put them into practice, and she then abandoned them. On the other hand, there were long-standing beliefs that were, for the most part, deeply rooted in her personal life experiences that transcended school. These beliefs, which had withstood the test of time, were the very essence of who she was as a person, and they were immutable to change. Over time, then, it was her teaching practices that gradually changed, as she made a concerted, career-long effort to develop a pedagogy that was consistent with her most deeply held beliefs.

The relative ineffectiveness of college experiences to influence the long-term thinking of preservice teachers has been well-documented. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) have observed that preservice teachers enter college with traditional notions about teaching and learning, temporarily become more progressive or liberal while in college, and then revert to their prior beliefs after they student-teach and enter full-time employment. Similarly, Holt-Reynolds (1994) has shown that preservice teachers often adopt the practices taught in their education methods courses without fully understanding or embracing the theories upon which they are based. They rely heavily upon their pre-existing belief systems, even though these systems may be diametrically opposed to the teaching practices which they are enthusiastically adopting. The story of Anna may help to explain this phenomenon.

If preservice teachers enter college with traditional attitudes toward teaching and learning, which gradually become more progressive while they are in college—but only temporarily—then perhaps it is because their teacher education experiences have not really challenged their existing thinking. My study with Anna suggests that authentic change occurs when one's beliefs have been challenged in some way and found to be lacking. It would seem that the responsibility of teacher educators, therefore, is to figure ways to highlight any acknowledged shortcomings and inconsistencies of preservice teachers' existing beliefs—not so that other beliefs can be mechanically inserted in their place, but rather as a form of self-discovery in which preservice teachers gain insights into their thinking and develop functional pedagogies that are both theoretically-sound and consistent with who they are as people.

In the end, this study illustrates that being a teacher involves much more than simply mastering of a set of skills. It also involves the development of an inner awareness—a sense of how one's life experiences have helped to shape the beliefs and underlying assumptions that ultimately guide one's practices. All teachers seek a coherence between their personal theories of teaching and the practical demands of their jobs, but there is no single way to achieve this goal. There is no universal formula for success. Instead, all teachers must ultimately develop their own personal pedagogies which are consistent with their inner selves. In this way, teaching can be understood as an artistic form of self-expression.

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