A GOOD AND WORTHWHILE LIFE:  
THE NATURE AND IMPACT OF ELEMENTARY TEACHER PERSONAL LEARNING  

by  

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Abstract

This three-phase qualitative study examined the significance of personal learning in the lives of full-time elementary school teachers in Ontario, Canada. The research aimed to provide an awareness of the effects of engaged personal learning on teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school. An online questionnaire was used as the initial exploratory tool. The questionnaire was completed by 87 Ontario elementary teachers, and results were stratified by age, gender, range of learning experiences, and career stage. The questionnaire was used to generate descriptive statistics, identify how elementary teachers pursue personal learning interests across different career stages, and gather open responses, in order to determine how teachers characterize their engagement in personal learning opportunities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven participants to characterize the teachers’ learning experiences, and to explore their views as to how their learning affected them personally and professionally. Classroom observations ensued with three of the interviewees. The data analysis indicated that the nature of personal learning varies across different career stages, and that such learning occurs most often in an informal setting. It also revealed the significance of learning opportunities that both challenge and extend knowledge in real-life contexts and/or that is social or collaborative in nature. Three themes—connections, self as learner, and vitality—emerged from the reported effects of teachers’ personal learning on their students and their classroom practice. The teachers’ passion for learning was evident in the many ways that they provide meaningful, collaborative, and challenging opportunities for their students in a very supportive and nurturing environment. Through the data collection and analysis, it became clear that some of the most profound learning experiences were not preplanned or intentional in nature, but
arose as a result of life. In some cases, the participants did not consider these experiences to be learning—until they began to detail the effects that these experiences had on them, both as individuals and as educators. Suggestions for future research are offered to continue learning from teachers who take part in personal learning, and from the students that they teach.
Acknowledgements

When I started my doctoral studies, I could never have imagined the many ways that I would be inspired, guided, challenged, and encouraged. There are many people who contributed to this research and my acknowledgments cannot convey the magnitude of influence nor the number of people who have supported me throughout this process.

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This work would not have been possible without the eleven interview participants, especially Darren, Ursula, and Rebecca, who generously gave their time, spirit, and passion
for learning to this study. Your commitment to providing an education about life and for life is an inspiration.

During my graduate studies and long before, my family has been a constant support to me. Mom and Dad, thank you for your unwavering belief in me. You both model a life rich with education in its broadest sense, and exemplify how to lead a life that is good and worthwhile. I would especially like to thank Chris, Willa and Harrison. The joy and the learning that I experience every day with you are immeasurable. Words cannot express my gratitude for your support, patience, and encouragement, and for the balance and meaning that you bring to my life.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................. iv

Chapter 1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
  Personal Experience with the Phenomenon ......................................................................................... 2
  Definition of Key Terms ...................................................................................................................... 4
  Context for the Research .................................................................................................................... 4
  Research Questions ............................................................................................................................. 5
  Overview of the Study ......................................................................................................................... 6

Chapter 2 Methodology ......................................................................................................................... 9
  Multiple Case Study Design ............................................................................................................... 9
  Relation to Phenomenology ............................................................................................................... 11
    Transcendental Phenomenology ...................................................................................................... 11
  Research Design ............................................................................................................................... 12
    Participant Selection ....................................................................................................................... 12
    Ethical Clearance ............................................................................................................................ 16
  Data Collection .................................................................................................................................. 16
    Questionnaire .................................................................................................................................. 16
    Interviews ......................................................................................................................................... 17
    Classroom observations .................................................................................................................... 18
    Field notes ....................................................................................................................................... 20

Analysis ................................................................................................................................................ 20
  Quantitative Data Analysis ............................................................................................................... 20
  Qualitative Data Analysis .................................................................................................................. 22
    Epoché ............................................................................................................................................ 23
    Significant statements ..................................................................................................................... 23
    Meaning units .................................................................................................................................. 23
    Inter-rater reliability ....................................................................................................................... 24
    Textural description ......................................................................................................................... 25
    Structural description ....................................................................................................................... 26
  The essence of the phenomenon ........................................................................................................ 26
Authenticity..................................................................................................................69
Overcoming Challenges ............................................................................................71
Findings ......................................................................................................................72
Connections .............................................................................................................73
Self as Learner ..........................................................................................................76
Vitality .......................................................................................................................78
Discussion .................................................................................................................79
Chapter 6 Engaged Classroom Learning ................................................................81
Meaningful Activity ......................................................................................................88
Collaboration With Others ........................................................................................91
Passion and Commitment ..........................................................................................93
Supportive and Nurturing Community .....................................................................95
Discussion .................................................................................................................98
Chapter 7 Learning to Watch, Wait, and Wonder: Parenthood and Teaching ........100
Learning to Watch ....................................................................................................101
Learning to Wait .........................................................................................................105
Learning to Wonder ....................................................................................................111
Discussion .................................................................................................................113
Chapter 8 Closing Thoughts ...................................................................................116
Features of Personal Learning Opportunities ..........................................................117
Why They Learn .......................................................................................................118
Classroom Impact .....................................................................................................118
Implications ...............................................................................................................120
Implications for Teachers ........................................................................................120
Implications for Programs That Support Elementary Teaching and Learning ..........123
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research ........................................125
Final Thoughts: Education and Schooling ..............................................................127
References ...............................................................................................................130
Appendix A Approval from Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, Letters of Information and Consent Forms.................................................................142
Appendix B Data Collection Instruments: Questionnaire, Interview Questions and Observation Recording Sheets

............................................................................................................................................. 151
List of Figures

Figure 1. Geographic Location and School Type of Questionnaire Participants .................. 13
Figure 2. Teaching Assignment of Questionnaire Participants at Time of Data Collection .... 36
Figure 3. Gender and Career Stage of Questionnaire Participants ..................................... 37
Figure 4. How Personal Learning Impacts Practice ................................................................. 73
Figure 5. Grade Four and Five Students using Band Saw in Darren’s Class ......................... 89
Figure 6. Rachel serving lunch ......................................................................................... 90
Figure 7. Building a house in Rachel’s class ......................................................................... 92
Figure 8. Rehearsal for Ursula’s students ............................................................................ 93
Figure 9. Using a drill in the workshop ................................................................................ 95
Figure 10. Ursula demonstrating chord progressions with a student .................................. 96
Figure 11. Rebecca and her students watching an impromptu puppet show ..................... 97
List of Tables

Table 1 .................................................................................................................................15
Table 2 .................................................................................................................................25
Table 3 ..................................................................................................................................38
Chapter 1

Introduction

When I first began graduate studies, some of my professors and fellow graduate students were involved in regular art-making sessions. The group gathered informally, every Wednesday morning, to create together and enjoy a temporary reprieve from work-related demands. As a new member of the graduate community, I was welcomed into the group and introduced to watercolours, acrylics, encaustics, collage, and mixed media.

A few months into these Wednesday morning sessions, I was visiting with a good friend and elementary teaching colleague, and I described these sessions and the profound impact they were having on my overall well-being, the deepening of my relationships with various members of the group, as well as the tremendous growth and confidence that I experienced as the weeks passed. I remember saying, “imagine if elementary teachers had this opportunity—wouldn’t that be amazing?” My friend laughed and shook her head, clearly revealing her doubt that this kind of personal and fulfilling learning would ever be offered, never mind encouraged, for elementary teachers.

As I was collecting data and writing this dissertation, people would often ask about my area of research and the progress of my work. When I told them of my interest in the personal learning endeavours of elementary teachers, most people would respond with a comment about how little time they had for such activities and how overwhelmed they felt by the pace of life, the demands of their jobs, and the needs of their families. This happened with colleagues, family members, acquaintances, and total strangers. Regardless of whether or not they were participants in the study, the desire to have more time for a balanced life was shared by all. Many scholars have commented that contemporary society is marked by extraordinary frenzy and a vague feeling, as MIT Professor Alan Lightman (2003) put it, of “not keeping up” (p. 289). This hurried pace, and the need to always
do more, is certainly experienced by elementary teachers (Hargreaves, 1994; Intrator & Kunzman, 2006).

The power of these conversations propelled me to conduct research on the phenomenon of personal learning, as experienced by elementary teachers. This research is guided by a phenomenological perspective—that is, it was designed to describe the meaning of lived experiences, and to explore how human beings make sense of a phenomenon, both individually and as shared meaning (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The further along I moved with the data collection, and the more teachers I spoke with, the clearer it became that personal learning was a phenomenon worth investigating.

**Personal Experience with the Phenomenon**

Sadly, we do not honour personal learning in the same way that we honour professional learning. Recently, in my role as an elementary school teacher, I sat down to complete my Annual Learning Plan. Every year, in consultation with their principals, all teachers in Ontario, other than new teachers, are legally required to prepare an Annual Learning Plan (ALP). Extracurricular activities and community involvement are not to be included in the ALP; I found that there was no space for me to include my personal learning experiences, only space to list professional activities that support my professional growth goals.

I am drawn to settings where there is joy and engagement in teaching and learning. For me, these moments have occurred during school gardening programs, musical theatre productions, and particularly engaging mathematics and science lessons. I have come to believe that this joy and engagement stems from taking part in activities that bring beauty, nourishment, and wonder to our lives. As an elementary teacher, I have experienced beauty, nourishment, and wonder in my own personal learning endeavours, and I posit that teachers who take part in personal learning can offer
richer and more varied experiences to their students and may, in turn, have more vibrant and engaging classrooms.

I was fortunate to be raised in a supportive home, by parents who encouraged my participation in a variety of extracurricular activities. The value of integrating extracurricular activities and learning throughout all of the aspects of life was also modeled by my parents, who continue, to this day, to learn for their own personal interests and satisfaction. I was very involved in the arts from an early age: I was enrolled in dance, piano, and voice lessons. I also took swimming lessons, played baseball, attended summer camp, and was enrolled in 4H and Girl Guides. Not only did I enjoy learning outside of school, I took great pleasure in attending elementary school every day. I felt accepted and successful, both in and outside of school. My childhood memories are positive, and the wide variety of personal learning experiences provided me with many such memories.

The sense of pride and accomplishment I felt as a child has shaped my goals and aspirations in adulthood in profound ways. The extracurricular experiences I took part in as a child remain important parts of my life as an adult. I continue to participate in the arts, enjoy athletics, and place a strong value in the outdoors and in domestic arts. My professional experience as an elementary school teacher has provided me opportunities to share these kinds of experiences with my students. And yet, I’ve often wondered why is it that the things that have intrigued me most, as a child and as an adult, are not amongst the subjects and activities that students encounter in their years of schooling?

It is the value and importance of the phenomenon of learning in my personal life, learning for myself—when no one is watching, when no one is testing, or when the learning activity doesn’t “count” (Upitis, 2003)—that has led me to study how others experience and value personal learning. Through this study, I sought to learn if other teachers value their personal learning experiences, and if they bring these experiences into their schools for their students.
Definition of Key Terms

In this study, learning is defined as attending to and reflecting on an experience in a manner that results in some present or future change in one’s behaviour, knowledge, attitude, beliefs, or skills. Personal learning is defined as attending to and reflecting on a personal experience for one’s individual needs or interests thus resulting in some present or future change in one’s behaviour, knowledge, attitude, beliefs, or skills. Personal learning is not professional learning, although one experience may facilitate both personal and professional learning. Professional learning is defined as learning that educators take part in that is meant to lead to effective teaching practices and improved student results. Engaged learning is defined as a process in which one becomes wholly involved in the process of transforming information and experience into behaviour, knowledge, attitude, beliefs, or skills. Lifelong learning is defined as continued interest and involvement in learning and personal growth. Finally, Elementary indicates grades Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8.

Context for the Research

When I have asked elementary teachers about their personal learning experiences, they have described significant experiences in their lives. And yet they have also noted experiencing tremendous difficulty when balancing these experiences with their professional obligations. This tension fuelled my interest, and prompted me to investigate why, if personal learning is so valued and important to those teachers who take part in it, its role in our profession has been overlooked.

The teaching profession encourages teachers to become lifelong learners so that they might, in turn, model the behaviour and instill a love of learning in their students. However, lifelong learning is almost always used synonymously with professional learning—opportunities to learn about aspects of curriculum, assessment, or instruction (Delhi & Fumia, 2002; Fenwick, 2001; Lohman, 2006; Smaller, Clark, Hart, Livingstone, & Noormohamed, 2000). The present study explores an alternative conception of lifelong learning. It examines learning that teachers undertake
for their own personal interests and well-being, and investigates how this type of learning influences the teachers themselves, as well as their classroom teaching and their students’ learning.

Within the profession there is a narrowly defined understanding of teacher learning, a term that almost always refers to improving instructional practice and raising student achievement (Borko, 2004, p. 3). There has been considerable research on formal and informal teacher learning in these areas (Delhi & Fumia, 2002; Lohman, 2006). Recent studies have demonstrated that a higher percentage of teachers are engaged in formal courses and workshops connected to their profession than the general Canadian labour force (Smaller et al., 2000). In addition to this formal learning, teachers report that they also spend an average of four hours per week in informal learning related to their jobs. However, there has not been substantial research on how types of nonprofessional or personal learning for teachers affect the teachers themselves, their classrooms, and their young students.

Research Questions

Overall, the purpose of the study was to provide an enriched sense of the effects of personal learning on both elementary teachers and their students, and to provide teachers with strategies for bridging their personal lives with their professional careers. The research characterized the richness of personal learning and the pursuit of personal learning interests across different career stages. Further, it determined the effects of engaged personal learning on teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school.

In order to achieve these research goals, the phenomenon of personal learning was examined from the perspective of elementary teachers who had taken part in personal learning opportunities. The following research questions were developed with the aim of describing the effects of these kinds of learning on both the teachers and their students. The research questions are as follows:
1. What kinds of personal learning opportunities do elementary teachers engage in across different career stages?

2. What are the underlying purposes and motivations that teachers assign to these personal learning opportunities?

3. In what ways do elementary teachers report that their engagement in personal learning informs their classroom practice?

4. Based on classroom observations, in what ways does personal learning on the part of the teacher affect the classroom and student engagement?

While established bodies of scholarly literature and research exist on the topics of adult learning in general, professional learning among teachers, and student engagement, research is less developed in the field of personal learning—especially among educators. Scholars in teacher learning suggest that new research in this field should (a) explore the adult learner holistically, with more value placed on the context of the learning; (b) rethink the ways in which teachers’ career paths are investigated; and (c) consider the role that the person plays in the profession (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006; Merriam, 2001; Rolls & Plauborg, 2009). The present research touches on all three of these themes.

**Overview of the Study**

This text is organized into eight chapters. In the present chapter, I introduce the study and share my own experiences with the phenomenon. In Chapter 2, I describe the methodology that underpins the research and the specific methods used to collect and analyze data. I describe the online questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews, and the classroom observation sessions, specifying how participants were selected. The phenomenological approach is detailed and the methods used to enhance the trustworthiness and overall quality of the study are described. The findings of prior research and the literature related to this study are woven throughout Chapters 3
through 7. Chapter 3 begins with a review of conceptual and empirical literature relating to career stages and adult learning contexts. Using data collected from the online questionnaire, I then present the kinds of learning opportunities elementary teachers engage in across different career stages.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are closely related, illustrating the features of engaged learning for both the teachers and the students, and how engaged learning was both reported and enacted by the participants. The construct of engaged learning and the features of engaged learning for adults are considered in Chapter 4. The data for this chapter were derived from the open responses of an online questionnaire and interview transcripts. Here I characterize the richness of engaged personal learning in the lives of elementary teachers and provide an enriched sense of the reported effects of personal learning on the elementary teachers themselves. Chapter 5 focuses on determining the effects of engaged personal learning on teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school. The chapter begins with an examination of literature that conveys the features of engaged learning in elementary-aged students. This literature provides a framework to explore the ways in which teacher learning reportedly impacts the engagement of the young learners in their classrooms.

Data collected from the online questionnaire and interview transcripts revealed three central themes. The three observation participants are introduced individually in Chapter 6. Using data collected from the questionnaires, interview transcripts, and observation sessions, these descriptions provide a comprehensive understanding of how each of these three teachers has experienced the phenomenon of personal learning throughout their teaching careers and how their personal learning affects the classroom and the students.

In Chapter 7, the power of unanticipated learning experiences that arise as a result of day-to-day living is presented in an exploration of learning in parenthood. Here I explore the learning that some of the participants described, framed by the verbs watch, wait, and wonder. In the final chapter, I discuss the results and the limitations of the study. I summarize the research findings and draw
implications for the effects of personal learning on both elementary teachers and their students. This chapter also offers suggestions to support the bridging of the personal lives and professional careers of educators and recommends directions for future research.
Chapter 2

Methodology

This research study aims to understand how teachers who pursue personal learning activities not only bring joy and wonder to their own lives, but also to the lives of their students. Specifically, this research examines how teachers’ engagement in their own personal learning potentially impacts the learning that takes place for their students.

This chapter describes the methodology that underpins the research and the specific methods used to collect and analyze data. First, I discuss the qualitative nature of this study and how phenomenology informs the research design. I then detail the components of the method: (a) participant selection, (b) data collection, and (c) analysis. The chapter ends with a description of the approaches used to enhance the trustworthiness and overall quality of the study.

This qualitative study seeks to understand the learning experiences of elementary teachers by attempting to interpret the phenomena in terms of the meanings the teachers bring to them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002). I take an approach to qualitative researching that Patton (2002) describes as “exploratory research” (p. 139). He notes that this approach is appropriate in new fields of study, where little work has been done and little is known about the phenomenon. Exploratory studies also aim to discover significant themes, patterns, and categories in participants’ meaning structures (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Multiple Case Study Design

The availability of multiple data sources, the distinct contexts, and the phenomenon of the engaged learning classroom to study led to the decision to use a case study design for this research. Creswell (2007) defines case study research as “an exploration of a bounded system or a case over
time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). Merriam (1998) further clarifies a case study as an “examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or social group” (p. 9).

A collective case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994), also referred to as a multiple case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), is a design used when it is appropriate to consider several cases in a single study. Merriam (1998) explains that, “the case study focuses on a single unit within which there may be several examples, events, or situations (which) can be exemplified by numerous case studies” (p. 46). Similarly, Stake (1995) points out that, in some situations, we may feel the need to choose several individuals for a study because each case is instrumental to learning about a particular process, event or phenomenon. In this study, case studies also facilitate multiple data collection techniques from diverse sources (Patton, 2002).

A number of unique components are present in case study design; Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (1994) propose: (a) defining the case as a bounded system (Stake, 1995), or a process (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994) framed by both time and place; (b) situating the case in its natural context; and (c) obtaining data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). I made the decision to frame this study as a case study because of its natural fit to these design elements. The phenomenon of how teacher personal learning informs engaged classroom learning can be defined as a bounded system, situated contextually in the lives of the teachers and in their classrooms. In addition, as case study design demands, data have been collected using multiple methods and sources: questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations. One other aspect to note is the instrumental nature of this study. Stake (1995) classifies case studies as either intrinsic or instrumental, based on the focus of the study. He explains that, if the focus is on the uniqueness of a given case, it is deemed an intrinsic case study, in reference to the researcher’s intrinsic interest in the case. In contrast, if the focus is on understanding a process or an issue, it is
an instrumental case study, because the study is instrumental in understanding something other than
the case itself. In this regard, this study is an instrumental, collective case study, exploring the
process, issues, meaning, and impact of elementary teachers’ personal learning, both on themselves
and on engaged learning in their elementary classrooms.

**Relation to Phenomenology**

A phenomenological perspective informs the research design. Phenomenological studies
describe the meaning of lived experiences and explore how human beings make sense of a
phenomenon, both individually and as shared meaning (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). It is
important to explore the underlying meaning of teachers’ learning experiences, both in terms of
outward appearances and inward consciousness. The impact of personal learning for elementary
teachers is, in my view, embedded in the meaning they attribute to their experiences. Therefore, a
major focus of this study is to explore the underlying meaning of each teacher’s learning experience.

Phenomenology has also been explained as the study of how humans describe and
experience a phenomenon through their senses (Husserl, 1913), and as the study of the lived
experiences of persons (van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1994) explained phenomenology as the
description of what humans have experienced and how they have experienced it. He stressed that
phenomenological studies describe the essences of these lived experiences, rather than providing
explanations or analyses. Despite various definitions, phenomenologists agree that a rich, full
understanding of any human phenomenon requires a deep, probing examination of people’s lived
experiences (Creswell, 2007; Husserl, 1913; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

There is no single way of applying phenomenology in research studies. One approach,
termed transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), places more emphasis on
a description of the experience of participants, and less on the interpretations of the researcher.
Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology was selected for this research because of its focus on the wholeness of experience, its pursuit of essences of experiences, and its understanding of experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship between subject and object. The transcendental emphasis involves the researcher setting aside prejudgments as much as possible and using systematic procedures for analyzing the data.

Analyzing phenomenological data, according to Moustakas (1994), follows a systematic procedure that is rigorous yet accessible to qualitative researchers. The present research on the personal learning experiences of elementary teachers follows this process. The following sections outline the design and analysis procedures of this study and detail how they relate to transcendental phenomenology.

**Research Design**

**Participant Selection**

By definition, phenomenological research requires that data be collected from those who have experienced the phenomenon. Whether the term “purposeful” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 126) or “purposive” sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 40) is used, it is critical that participants be chosen carefully so that a deep understanding of the phenomenon may ensue. I took particular care in identifying participants by considering personal learning involvement, school curricula, and qualities of individual teachers. Further, I identified the specific phases of data collection to which particular participants might contribute the most.

Participants for this study were recruited through distribution of an online questionnaire (see Appendix B). This form of maximum variation sampling was selected in order to diversify the sample by age, gender, range of learning experiences, and career stage. Six Ontario school boards and 13 independent schools in Ontario were contacted for Ethical Approval in the fall of 2010. Two school boards and three independent schools granted approval for the study. The questionnaire was
also distributed to elementary teachers through two websites: the general website for the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University (www.educ.queensu.ca), and the Queen’s University Continuing Teacher Education website (www.coursesforteachers.ca). After six months, 123 participants responded, which yielded a total of 87 questionnaires, completed fully, including all of the open-ended responses. The geographic locations and type of schools are depicted in Figure 1, below.

![Geographic Location and Type of School](image)

**Figure 1. Geographic Location and School Type of Questionnaire Participants**

Of the 87 participants who completed the entire questionnaire, 22 learned of the research through their school or school board email, 22 through the Continuing Teacher Education website, 6 from the Faculty of Education website, 17 from colleagues, and 20 from direct contact with the researcher. Although only two school boards and three independent schools were willing to distribute the link to the survey through their school board emails, the geographical range of participants shows that the online questionnaire results were not limited by the school board approvals that were granted. Not only did participants represent diverse geographical settings, they also represented a range of populated areas. 37 participants taught in urban schools, 20 taught in schools in suburban settings, and 30 taught in schools located in rural areas.
At the end of the questionnaire, participants indicated whether or not they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Forty-one of the eighty-seven respondents (47%) indicated their willingness to be interviewed. To the extent possible, interview participants were selected purposefully to represent engaged learners with a range of ages, career stages, genders, and personal learning experiences. I also endeavored to have my sample of interviewees be as representative as possible of the current demographics of Canadian teachers (Statistics Canada, 2008). As such, I aimed to select three males and eight females. Further, I needed to interview two teachers in the first career stage (newly qualified), three or four teachers in the second career stage (established), four teachers in the third career stage (reassessing their careers), and one teacher in the final career stage (final years). I was unable to fully meet this criterion, although I came very close with four male and seven female participants across all four career stages. Table 1 shows the stratification of the interview participants.

Each of the eleven interview participants graduated from a Bachelor of Education program in Ontario, and two had received a Master’s degree in Education. Nine participants had taken additional, formal qualification courses since completing their teaching degrees, and all were teaching full-time. At the time of the study, five of the participants lived and taught in rural areas, five in urban areas, and one in a suburban area. Interestingly, none of the participants taught in a community dissimilar from the one in which they lived. Seven of the participants were parents, five of whom still had at least one of their children living with them in their homes.
Table 1

Demographic Stratification of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Career Stage</th>
<th>Current Teaching Assignment</th>
<th>Kind of School</th>
<th>Location of School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>Newly Qualified</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>Newly Qualified</td>
<td>Junior-Intermediate</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Reassessing</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Reassessing</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Final Years</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Final Years</td>
<td>Primary</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>Final Years</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants engaged in at least three different kinds of personal learning opportunities throughout their careers, such as technology, gardening, fitness, or handwork. Most listed more than seven different kinds of personal learning endeavours. All eleven provided examples of personal learning that I had not included in the questionnaire (e.g. pilot’s license, second language learning, astronomy). Three also offered examples of their professional learning opportunities as associate teachers, mentor teachers, and participants in Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP). All eleven saw the value of personal learning throughout their careers and nine indicated that their personal learning endeavours impacted their teaching practice and their students a great deal.

After I had completed all of the eleven interviews, I began selecting the participants for classroom observations. I determined that I would like to observe a primary, a junior, and an intermediate classroom, and that I wanted to include both urban and rural schools, as well as both
publicly and privately funded schools. It was also important that the participants were in three different career stages and that they were engaged in a variety of personal learning endeavours. I contacted three of the interview participants, (P3, P7, P11) and all three consented to participating in the classroom observation sessions.

**Ethical Clearance**

I received ethical clearance for the full dissertation study from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen`s University in August 2010 (see Appendix A for letters of information and consent forms). Once this approval was received, I recruited teachers and sought out ethical clearance from the respective school boards. Questionnaire participants gave informed consent as part of the questionnaire itself. A Letter of Information and two copies of a consent form were distributed to participants who were interviewed. Teacher participants in the classroom observations received a letter of information and two copies of a consent form for observations as well as for the use of still photographs. A Letter of Information and two copies of consent forms for both classroom observations and still photographs were also distributed to the parents of the students in the classrooms.

**Data Collection**

A variety of methods can be used in phenomenologically based research, including interviews, conversations, participant observations, and analysis of personal texts (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, four sources were used to collect data from a diverse sample of Ontario elementary teachers: (a) questionnaire, (b) semi-structured interviews, (c) classroom observations, and (d) field notes taken during the interviews and classroom observations. In the following sections, I elaborate on each of these sources.

**Questionnaire.** A questionnaire was used as the initial exploratory tool to generate descriptive statistics, to identify how elementary teachers pursue personal learning interests across
different career stages, and to gather open responses to determine how teachers characterize their engagement in their learning opportunities. The web-based questionnaire (see Appendix B) was piloted with five graduate students who had worked as elementary school teachers. The five individuals provided feedback on the survey in April and May of 2010. The questionnaire was examined during both committee meetings and a comprehensive exam in June 2010. These assessments resulted in further additions and modifications, such as the inclusion of the descriptions for Question 12 and the addition of other to Question 1. The final version of the questionnaire was developed and housed in StudentVoice (https://ca.studentvoice.com/) and was made accessible for a nine-month period, from September 2010 to May 2011. The questionnaire was also used to select participants for the next phase of the research, and to develop guiding questions or topics needed for the phenomenological research interview (Moustakas, 1994).

The questionnaire was designed with both closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions focused on demographic information and the kinds of learning that the teachers had engaged in. Specifically, ten questions relating to demographic information and teaching experience were posed and a matrix was provided, on which participants could indicate how many times they have taken part in learning experiences and in what kind of setting this learning occurred (formal, non-formal, or informal). Open-ended questions invited teacher participants to describe their engaging and disengaging learning experiences, the evolution of their learning throughout their careers, and the extent to which they think their personal learning experiences impact their classroom teaching and their students.

**Interviews.** Based on the questionnaire results, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven participants, representing teachers across four career stages (Day et. al, 2006; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Steffy & Wolfe, 1997). Interview participants were also selected purposefully to represent engaged learners with a range of personal learning experiences. Interviews
were conducted from February 2011 to May 2011. One participant responded to the interview questions in written form. The live interviews were audiotaped, were approximately one hour in length, and were transcribed for the purposes of analysis (see Appendix B for interview questions). The live interviews took place in participants’ classrooms, coffee shops, public libraries, and in one private home.

As recommended for phenomenological inquiry, topical or guided interviews were based on a semi-standardized guide with open-ended questions. This enables the research to explore a few general topics while respecting the way the participants frame and structure the responses. This is fundamental to phenomenological research, whereby the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon should unfold as the participant views it and not as the researcher views it (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The purpose of these interviews was to characterize the richness of the teachers’ learning experiences and their perceptions of how their personal learning impacted both themselves and their teaching. To this end, participants were questioned regarding their personal learning interests and underlying motivations, their views of how their personal learning has changed across career stages, and the reported impact of their personal learning on classroom teaching and learning. The interviews also add to the trustworthiness of results from the questionnaire data.

**Classroom observations.** Next, I identified three participants who indicated through both the questionnaire and the interview that they were engaged learners, and who were willing to have me observe their classrooms. These classroom observations were used to determine the impact of personal learning experiences on the teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school, using field notes, audio-recordings, and photographs as data.

Observational data were gathered by spending 5 to 10 hours at each site, to gain further insights into the learning activities employed by teachers as well as to gain a more visceral sense of
the classroom. Specifically, I developed a running log of observation (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) that described the setting, general characteristics of the classroom, and community. To record levels of engaged learning within the elementary classes, I used a variation of the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC; Laevers, 1994). This particular observation scale was selected because it enables researchers to judge levels of student engagement for a specific period of time rather than for a specific activity. The scale consists of two components: (a) a list with signals of behaviour and (b) five scale rates, from low activity to sustained intense activity. Signals of behaviour include concentration, energy, facial expression, persistence, satisfaction, reaction time, and verbal utterances. The original scale was modified to create two scales specifically for this research (See Appendix B for the original and modified scales). The scale for teacher observations was modified by adding three signals of behaviour. Collaboration, critical reflection, and nurturing behaviours were added because the literature revealed that they are features of engaged learning in adults (Dirkx, 2001; Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, & Volpe, 2009; Merriam, 2008). The scale for student observations was also modified by removing persistence and satisfaction from the signals of behaviour. Persistence was replaced with overcoming challenge and satisfaction was replaced with a sense of belonging. Other signals of behaviour were added to the scale for student observations: collaboration, ownership of learning, and authentic challenge. These additional signals of behaviour were identified during a review of the literature as features of engaged learning in elementary-aged children (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Sharan & Tan, 2008; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998).

Before commencing the classroom observations, I practiced making observations using the Leuven scales with adult participants during a one-day, handwork class. This pilot session allowed me to fine-tune the instruments and hone my skills in making detailed and accurate notes. Photographs of the classroom enhanced the observations and enabled me to detail the personality
and characteristics of the classroom community in a way that enhanced my written observations and also increased the trustworthiness of this study.

**Field notes.** Another data collection method that enhanced the descriptions gained from the interviews and classroom observations was the use of field notes. I used a journal to document or “memo” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69) the thoughts, feelings, and observations that I experienced in the course of collecting and reflecting during each interview or classroom observation session. These were later used to enhance my analysis of the findings and to ensure that I was making authentic reflections that were balanced between descriptive notes and reflective notes such as hunches, impressions, and feelings.

During the interviews, the field notes were a way to reflect on how the interview progressed and to make observations on the setting and the participant's behaviour. As well, writing observations allowed for reflection on personal meanings and understandings acquired from the interview. When the participants were sharing some of their experiences, I found myself recollecting some of my personal learning experiences; therefore, I had to be careful to remain aware of my own personal conceptions of the effects of personal learning and of how my own feelings and interpretations might affect the participants’ comments. The field notes from the classroom observations also documented my impressions of and feelings on the settings and the activities within each location.

**Analysis**

**Quantitative Data Analysis**

The use of descriptive statistics provided me with the opportunity to present a richer picture and an enhanced representation of the personal learning of elementary teachers in Ontario (Schreiber, 2008). In this study, a nominal measurement scale was used to describe the sample and summarize the closed-response data collected with the questionnaire. This resulted in categorical
variables, and the findings are reported as frequencies in each category. No inferential statistics are used in this study. The data were organized by (a) demographic information and teaching experience, and (b) personal learning experiences. The types of data, as well as the scales used for each of these sections, are now discussed, followed by a discussion of how the data were analyzed.

In the first section, closed-form questions provided categories to indicate the gender and age of the participants, as well as the highest level of education they had attained. Participants also selected closed-form responses to indicate their years of teaching experience, their current teaching position, their geographic location, and their school’s setting (i.e. rural, urban, or suburban). Finally, participants used a checklist format to specify which divisions they were qualified to teach, and any additional qualifications attained.

The second section began by asking participants to indicate how many times they had taken part in various learning experiences since beginning their teaching careers. Options on the checklist included visual arts, music, fitness, cooking, dancing, handwork, book clubs, gardening, technology, photography, writing, academic courses, and other. The setting of the learning was also requested; participants could select formal, informal, and non-formal settings for each learning experience.

The final closed-form question asked participants to what extent they felt their personal learning experiences impact their classroom teaching and students. Responses were indicated on a five-point Likert scale. Options included not at all, slightly, moderately, considerably, and a great deal. There was also a space for participants to explain their selection. The data analysis for the closed-form components was completed using the tools in StudentVoice (https://ca.studentvoice.com/) and were also organized using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize findings and answer questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The findings are presented in the following chapters.
Open-ended questions were included in the latter part of the questionnaire to provide an opportunity for participants to respond to the following questions: (a) In what ways has your participation in your own personal learning changed throughout your teaching career? Please list the factors that have impacted your personal learning opportunities (e.g., family responsibilities, work-related responsibilities); (b) Please describe a learning experience when you were very engaged. What qualities do you think made this learning enjoyable for you?; and (c) Please describe a learning experience when you were not engaged. What qualities do you think made this learning less enjoyable for you?

As the questionnaires were completed, each set of responses to the open-ended questions was copied into individual Microsoft Word text files. Each of these files was then transported into ATLAS.ti software to facilitate the coding and analysis of the data. While the responses were used to aid in participant selection for the interviews, the analysis of this set of data was not conducted until after the analysis of all interview transcriptions.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, the development of a manageable classification or coding scheme is generally the first step of the analysis (Patton, 2002). In contrast, specific and structured methods of analysis are provided for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas reviewed several approaches to phenomenological analysis, and his modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen approach was used in this study (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). This approach is outlined below, with both an overview of the steps and how they were implemented in the current study. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen approach involves the following steps: (a) *epoché*, (b) significant statements, (c) meaning units, (d) textural description, (e) structural description, and (f) the essence of the phenomenon.
Epoché. *Epoché* is a Greek word meaning to “refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). The aim of epoché is to discover the phenomenon as it is experienced—rather than as it is conceptualized. In particular, it aims to bring a thoughtful attentiveness to the unique meaning and significance of a particular phenomenon. In this initial stage, the researcher begins with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon. This writing was an opportunity for me to become alert to my own personal conceptions of personal learning so that my focus could be directed to the participants in the study. For this study, epoché involved reflecting on my own personal learning experiences during my time as an elementary teacher. A description of my reflections is included in the introductory chapter.

**Significant statements.** This stage of analysis involves the researcher finding statements (either in the interviews or from other data sources) about how individuals experienced the phenomenon. These statements are all treated as having equal worth and are compiled into a list of separate, non-repetitive statements. I began this cyclical process by listening to the audio files of the interviews in their entirety in order to “get a sense of the whole” (Patton, 2002, p. 440). Next I transcribed the digital recordings into Microsoft Word text files. This process provided me the opportunity to immerse myself in the data and to note emergent themes. Then, I read and reread the open-ended responses to the questionnaires and added significant statements from this source to the growing list.

**Meaning units.** Here the significant statements are grouped into larger units of information called *meaning units* or themes. Willms, Best, Taylor, Gilbert, Wilson, Lindsay and Singer (1990), and Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that researchers start their coding with some general themes derived from related literature (etic codes) and then add more themes and subthemes as they analyze the data (emic codes). Following this advice, the data were considered using etic terms based on the
literature in the fields of engagement, adult learning, learning contexts, and career stages. These initial 18 themes included motivation, collaboration, relevance, passion, commitment, ownership, and challenge.

Once the data were transcribed, I reread the interviews several times until I felt that I had sufficient understanding of each participant’s implied meanings to analyze the data. Each data segment within the transcript was considered separately, and throughout each pass of the data, I thought about the participant, and what he or she was talking about or describing in that segment. The code list was then consulted and, if an appropriate code was not there, open coding (Charmaz, 2002) was employed to create a new code (emic) that reflected, more precisely, the subtle meanings of what the participant had actually said. For example, I was originally using the theme motivation for all data involving intent, need, and/or purpose, but I added new themes to differentiate between intent, connection to students, connection to curriculum, and learning with family. In all, I added 19 emic codes including aging, enjoyment, accomplishment, balance, energy, and confidence.

During this phase of the analysis some codes were also deleted due to redundancy. For example, challenge and struggle were merged to simply challenge, and authenticity and relevance were combined to form relevancy. Ultimately 36 codes or meaning units were identified with one segment often assigned several codes. After three passes through the data, patterns and relationships were noted.

Inter-rater reliability. In order to increase reliability and to expand and enrich the analysis, a doctoral student with both classroom teaching and personal learning experience served as a second reader and coder. A short training session took place in order to increase trustworthiness. The coding of the texts was assigned to this individual so that I could determine whether the meanings and experiences investigated were shared between coders and whether both individuals would apply the same code to particular segments of text. Krippendorf (1980) suggests that the coders should be
in agreement at least 70% of the time. This high level of inter-rater agreement is advocated to provide evidence that a theme has some external validity and is not the result of the investigator’s personal bias (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Table 2

Inter-rater Reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Researcher’s Codes</th>
<th>Second Reader’s Codes</th>
<th>Calculated Interrater Reliability</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Classroom atmosphere</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22/24</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Risk-taking</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( M = \# \) times the two coders agreed; \( N_1 \) and \( N_2 \) = \# of coding decisions each coder made.

Using ATLAS.ti, the second reader read and analyzed the data for three of the interview participants. Upon the coding of the first three transcripts, I calculated the interrater reliability between myself and the second reader. Table 2 shows the results of the calculations. I did so using a different code for each participant, to determine the extent to which we agreed on the coding of the content. For each code, our agreement was 90% or higher, so together we determined that she did not need to code the remaining transcripts. Upon completion of the coding we resolved together, through discussion, any differences that arose in the coding or in the interpretation of the data.

**Textural description.** In this stage of the analysis, the researcher provides a textural description of what was experienced. Upon completion of the coding, I reread the questionnaire data, the interview transcripts, and the field notes from the classroom observation sessions. I then compiled a textural description of what the teachers experienced, both through their personal
learning endeavours and in their classrooms. These descriptions are presented in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7.

**Structural description.** Here, the researcher writes a description of how the experiences happened. This involved reflecting on the setting and the context in which the personal learning was experienced. Structural descriptions are presented as the interpretations in Chapters 5 and 7.

**The essence of the phenomenon.** In this final stage of analysis and representation, the researcher writes a composite description of the phenomenon, incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. This passage is the “essence” of the experience and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. The essence of the phenomenon is described in the concluding chapter of the study.

**Approaches to Enhance Trustworthiness**

The use of the questionnaire as the initial exploratory tool presented a number of strengths in exploring the personal learning experiences of elementary teachers. The questionnaire (a) provided standard questions and uniform procedures for all participants, (b) provided time for subjects to think about their responses, (c) allowed for the development of some interview questions after a first analysis of questionnaire results, and (d) ensured anonymity. However, the inability to probe and clarify the open-ended questions was a limitation of this method.

The inclusion of semi-structured interviews with eleven participants raised a separate set of considerations regarding the validity of the findings. It was important to ensure, to the extent possible, that the participants and the researcher had a shared sense of meaning for concepts and experiences discussed. This was accomplished through constant checking with the participants throughout the interview to see if our meaning was shared. In particular, if I had doubt about how a participant was using a concept, I probed further to clarify. Indeed, a strength of the interview
approach is that it allows the researcher to probe and clarify responses and to include nonverbal behaviour in observations.

The observation sessions in the classrooms of three participants enriched the findings, but also raised further considerations. Through direct observation, I was better able to understand and capture the context of the classroom atmosphere, and I had the opportunity to see things that may have escaped the awareness of the teacher participant. The use of an observation scale assisted in the focus of the observations and provided structure for the sessions. Still photographs augmented the observations and allowed me to capture the characteristics and qualities of the classroom environments in a way that my field notes and observational data could not. A limitation of the observations was the reality that reactive effects may have occurred as the participants knew they were being observed and may have behaved in atypical ways.

A number of strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. The use of questionnaires, interviews, observations, and field notes allowed for overall triangulation in data collection and analysis. The use of a digital audio recording provided accurate and complete records of the interview sessions and portions of the observation sessions. The inclusion of verbatim transcripts of the audio recordings of the interviews provided literal statements and quotations of participants to illustrate meanings and increase validity. Finally, throughout the study, negative or discrepant data were actively sought, recorded, analyzed, and reported in order to provide variants to emerging patterns and themes.

In addition to these strategies, I also combined a number of documentation strategies to monitor and evaluate the impact of my subjectivity. First, as indicated earlier, I kept a field log to document the continual fieldwork, as well as a chronological record to detail individual dates, places, and persons involved in the study. Second, by recording the ongoing ideas, decisions, and personal reactions I had throughout the study, I was able to engage in a process of reflexivity and bring this
understanding to my analysis and implications. I also maintained a record of data management techniques including codes, categories, and themes to assist in the monitoring of data validity.

In this chapter, I have outlined the methodology that underpins the research and the specific methods used to collect and analyze data. The phenomenological approach was described and the approaches used to enhance the validity and trustworthiness were discussed. In the following five chapters I present the results of the data analysis, beginning with an exploration of how personal learning changes across career stages.
Chapter 3

Changes Across Career Stages

This chapter reports how elementary teachers pursue personal learning interests, both intentional and unintentional, across different career stages. Research suggests that teachers’ professional learning changes throughout their careers (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2007), and this study allows me to determine if personal learning also changes across career stages. The chapter begins with a review of conceptual and empirical literature relating to career stages and adult learning contexts. Using data collected from the online questionnaire, I then present the kinds of opportunities that the participants have taken part in across different career stages. Understanding the context of personal learning for the participants as a whole will allow for a more in-depth analysis of the features and implications of this kind of learning in the following chapters.

Educational researchers interested in teacher career stages have presented a number of models that divide the teaching profession, from graduation to retirement, into various stages or phases. Four major contributions, undertaken by Michael Huberman (1993), Ralph Fessler and Judith Christensen (1992), Betty Steffy and Michael Wolfe (1997), and Christopher Day et al. (2006), constitute a comprehensive investigation of the career paths of teachers. Although many other studies exist, they tend to concentrate on particular issues, such as classroom effectiveness or teacher retention, and are not as helpful in creating a general model for elementary teachers—a necessary element of this research study. These four models are presented below, followed by an explanation of how each has shaped the present study.

In his work, The Lives of Teachers, Huberman (1993) presented a qualitative study of career phases as experienced by 160 middle- and high-school teachers in Geneva, Switzerland. His research
identifies five general trends or phases in the professional life cycle of teachers: career entry, stabilization, experimentation, serenity and conservatism, and disengagement. His work considers how teachers continually evolve, how they assess their roles in the classroom, their effectiveness as teachers and the steps they take in their career development.

Fessler and Christensen’s (1992) Teacher Career Cycle Model considers various factors—both within and outside of the workplace environment—on teachers’ motivation, commitment, and enthusiasm at different stages of their careers. The model, intended to help understand the dynamic nature of a teacher’s work, is based on extensive research involving observations, interviews, case studies, and literature reviews. Fessler and Christensen (1992) identified eight career stages (pre-service, induction, competency building, enthusiastic and growing, career frustration, stability, career wind-down, career exit) and were careful to note that the stages are not linear. Rather, they explained that teachers move back and forth between stages based on a range of influences in their lives, such as personal and organizational environment. This study is very relevant to the present research, which considers personal variables that influence career stages, such as birth of children, illness, individual dispositions, family support structures, hobbies, and travel.

In *The Life Cycle of the Career Teacher*, Steffy and Wolfe (1997) identified six overlapping phases of the career of a committed teacher: novice, apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, and emeritus. The phases are not about years of experience, but are rather seen as levels of teaching that are affected by the ability of teachers to learn and complete scholarly work, and by their commitment to growth. For example, teachers are considered to be novices from the time they begin their first pre-service practicum experience until they complete their student teaching and/or internship. Expert teachers are described as those who provide a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment. These teachers incorporate the latest ideas and practices while maintaining leadership
roles in the profession. This model, based on Jack Mezirow’s (1991) transformation theory, recognizes that growth as a professional happens through a process of reflection and renewal.

A more recent study of teacher career stages is the VITAE project—Variations in Teachers’ Work, Lives and Their Effects on Pupils—conducted in the United Kingdom between 2001 and 2005 (Day et. al, 2006). This longitudinal, mixed-methods study examined the careers, lives, and effectiveness of 300 teachers from 100 different primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom. The VITAE project found that teacher commitment and effectiveness were influenced by a combination of the teachers’ professional life phases, their sense of professional identity, and factors determined by personal, workplace, and broader societal contexts.

The study (Day et al., 2006) identified six professional life phases, grounded in a framework that encompassed teachers’ cognitive, emotional, personal, and moral engagement in the profession. These professional life phases were determined by the number of years a teacher had spent in the profession: 0–3, 4–7, 8–15, 16–23, 24–30, and 31+ years of teaching. Within each of these phases, there were subgroups who experienced positive or negative commitment trajectories. For example, in the third phase, managing changes in role and identity, there were two subgroups: sustained engagement (76%) and detachment/loss of motivation (24%).

**Career Stages**

In the present study, I use a combination of the phases outlined by the researchers above in order to classify and select participants in four career stages. I included participants who were (a) newly qualified (within their first five years of teaching), (b) established within the profession (between six and fifteen years of teaching), (c) reassessing their careers (between 16–24 years), or (d) in their final years (more than 25 years teaching experience). Each of the models detailed above has components that align with these career stages.
Newly Qualified

The first stage—newly qualified—was created to group participants within their first five years of teaching. The four studies presented above described this stage as one of adjustment, discovery, and doubt. Two of Huberman’s (1993) phases make up this stage. Career entry is characterized as a period of survival and discovery, while stabilization is described as a time when teachers achieve greater comfort within the classroom and greater confidence in their abilities. Fessler and Christensen (1992) described an induction phase, during which teachers spend a few years adjusting to the differences between pre-service teacher education and the realities of the classroom. They are careful to note the dynamic nature of the profession and emphasize that teachers may reenter the induction phase later in their careers, perhaps due to a new school environment or teaching assignment. Sikes (1985) describes new teachers between the ages of 21 and 28 as entering the adult world, a phase when many new teachers have not yet made a conscious decision on a long-term future within the profession.

Steffy and Wolfe (1997) describe their second stage, the apprentice phase, as beginning when teachers have the full responsibility of planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction. This phase extends until teachers are confident in their knowledge of subject matter and of how to effectively teach to meet student needs. This phase also aligns with Day’s work, which refers to newly qualified teachers: It categorizes teachers during their first three years in the profession as having either a developing or a diminishing sense of efficacy (Day et al., 2006).

Established Within the Profession

I chose to create the second stage—established within the profession—to classify elementary teachers with 6–15 years of teaching. The literature has shown that this phase generally involves increased confidence, creativity, and motivation. For example, Huberman’s (1993) third phase, experimentation, describes teachers who seek out challenges and apply creativity to their planning.
They also have a sense of independence at this time and are more open to accepting criticism. This phase also aligns with Fessler and Christensen’s (1992) competency building phase, when teachers are highly motivated and receptive to new ideas. Steffy and Wolfe’s (1997) professional stage also corresponds with this phase, when the teacher is growing in confidence about his or her teaching ability and when positive relationships of respect are evident with students, parents, and other colleagues. Day et al.’s (2006) third professional life phase, 8–15 years: managing changes in role and identity, relates to this stage of growing tensions and transitions in both personal and professional roles.

**Reassessing their Careers**

The third stage—reassessing their careers—was created to categorize participants with 16–26 years of teaching experience. The four studies presented above described this stage as one of reflection and frustration. Huberman (1993) explained that when a teacher reaches 44 to 55 years old, he or she reaches a stage of reflection, where career ambition decreases and he or she begins a phase of serenity and self-acceptance. Two of Fessler and Christensen’s (1992) phases, career frustration and stable but stagnant, relate to this phase, when teachers experience growing disillusionment with the profession and may feel resigned to do what is expected but little more. Steffy and Wolfe’s (1997) phases are less aligned with this stage, although the expert teacher certainly fits the role of satisfied teachers at this stage of the career, who enjoy a safe and supportive environment while maintaining leadership roles in the profession. Also aligning with this third stage is Day et al.’s (2006) fourth professional life phase for teachers. In summary, this phase describes individuals who face work-life tension and have experienced increased or sustained motivation and commitment or have experienced challenges with motivation and commitment due to workload or stagnation.
Final Years

The fourth and final stage—final years—groups together the participants who have more than 25 years of teaching experience. The literature has shown that this stage generally encompasses gradual withdrawal and wind-down. For example, Huberman’s (1993) fifth phase, disengagement, involves teachers with more than 30 years of experience who gradually withdraw, have few regrets, and spend a great deal of time outside of the school. This stage also aligns with Fessler and Christensen’s (1992) career wind-down and career exit phases, when teachers plan to and then leave the profession. Steffy and Wolfe’s (1997) emeritus stage corresponds with this phase, when the teacher retires after a lifetime of achievement in education. Finally, Day et al.’s (2006) sixth professional life phase, 31+ years, reflects this stage as teachers begin to look ahead to change and eventually retire.

Bayer and colleagues (2009) have noted that research on teachers in the middle of the careers is somewhat scant, noting that perhaps mid-career teachers are only of interest when they are considering leaving the profession. The present research endeavours to address all elementary teachers across the spectrum of their careers, including those in the middle of their careers, in order to provide them with strategies for bridging their personal lives with their professional careers and, potentially, offer a means by which to keep them engaged and motivated in their work.

Adult Learning Contexts

The term learning can apply to an endless variety of processes and activities occurring in different ways with different intentions and outcomes. From a psychological point of view, learning is defined as “any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing” (Illeris, 2007, p. 3). For humans, this process is ongoing throughout life, whether intentional or incidental. Illeris (2007) further explained that, on one hand, learning is an external interaction process between the individual and his or her social and material environment, while on the other hand, the impressions and influences that the individual
receives from this interaction must be elaborated and internalized by an internal process of acquisition. Only if both of these processes are active does learning occur.

The first of these processes—the external interaction between the learner and environment—can be thought of as the context of the learning. Learning contexts are social, cultural, and societal; they depend on when and where the learning takes place (Hansman, 2001). One way of categorizing learning contexts is by using the three dimensions: formal, informal, and non-formal.

*Formal learning* refers to the deliberate, teacher-directed, systematic delivery of curriculum with well-defined specifications, often leading to formal certification (Russell, 2001). Workplace learning, including professional development and on-the-job training, is an example of formal learning. *Informal learning*, sometimes also termed unintended or experiential learning, generally results from daily life activities without pre-established curricula (Livingstone, 2001). This type of learning can be supported by access to Internet resources, such as search engines and websites, and includes hobbies and self-help efforts. Informal learning also encompasses the incidental learning that occurs with interactions amongst family, coworkers, community members, and the environment. Finally, *non-formal learning* describes learning when there is intention to learn but the learning typically does not lead to certification. Non-formal learning is deliberate, systematic, and occurs in a planned but highly adaptable manner in institutions, organizations, and situations beyond spheres of formal or informal education (Eshach, 2007). Participating in a book club or learning to run with a running group are examples of non-formal learning.

The contexts of adult learning are important to consider when examining engaged learning, as they play a role in the external interaction process between the learner and the environment (Ilferis, 2007). Learning contexts are of particular importance in this study, as the engaged learning of children will only be examined in a formal context while the engaged learning of adults will be
examined across contexts. While adults are not always engaged in their learning, it is important to note that engaged learning can occur regardless of the context.

Findings

The data for this chapter were derived from the online questionnaire distributed to Ontario elementary teachers by two school boards and three independent schools, and through two websites. 123 participants responded to the questionnaire, with a total of 87 completing it in its entirety, including all of the open-ended responses. The current teaching roles of the participants ranged from not currently teaching, to part-time and full-time. Nine participants held planning time positions, ten were in special education, and five taught French. Figure 2 shows the grade levels that participants were teaching at the time of data collection. It should be noted that only 16 of the 87 participants taught a single grade. This is significant because the remaining participants either had a split grade, which requires considerable time in planning and preparation, or were teachers who taught numerous classes and students, such as planning time teachers and music or French teachers.

![Figure 2. Teaching Assignment of Questionnaire Participants at Time of Data Collection](image)

The 12 male and 75 female participants were in diverse career stages. Figure 3 shows the career stages of the participants at the time of data collection. Thirty-one per cent of participants were in their first five years of teaching. According to Statistics Canada (2008), this number is higher than the national average of new teachers in 2008–2009, when 13% of all full-time teachers were in
their 20s. Forty per cent of the participants were established in their careers with 6 to 15 years of experience. This is reflective of the national number of full-time educators in Canada, 34% of whom were in their 30s (Statistics Canada, 2008). Eighteen per cent of participants had completed between 16 and 24 years of teaching, a considerably lower number than the national statistics, which reported that 40% of the teachers were aged 40 to 55 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Finally 10% of the participants were in the final years, with more than 25 years in the profession. Again, these numbers are reflective of the number of full-time educators in elementary and secondary schools in Canada, 12% of whom were over the age of 55 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Although the information gathered for the national survey includes both elementary and secondary teachers, and it only categorizes the educators by age, and not years of teaching experience, they are the only data available to compare my demographic information with.

![Participant Gender and Career Stage](image)

**Figure 3. Gender and Career Stage of Questionnaire Participants**

In addition to their basic teacher certification (B.Ed. degree), 74 (85%) participants held at least one Additional Qualification or Additional Basic Qualification Course such as Special Education, Reading, Math, or Librarianship. 19 (22%) participants had earned a Master’s degree. Clearly, the elementary teachers who elected to take part in this questionnaire are individuals who value professional learning. In fact, as Table 3 shows, all of the participants had taken part in at least one academic learning opportunity (e.g., Masters courses or additional qualification courses) since
beginning their careers. Aside from academic learning, the next most popular kinds of learning were related to fitness or technology.

**Table 3**

*Frequency and Setting of Personal Learning of Questionnaire Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1 time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2–3 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4–5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6–7 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic courses</td>
<td>0  9  14</td>
<td>15  10  35  79  20  0  0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book clubs</td>
<td>36 10 21</td>
<td>6  1  9  4  21  26  36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>33  9  7</td>
<td>5  2 22  2  8  36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
<td>45  9  7</td>
<td>2  4 10  11  10  15  45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>11  2  13</td>
<td>9  2 46  24  31  34  11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td>37  6  3</td>
<td>8  3 23  1  7  39  37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handwork</td>
<td>39  5  9</td>
<td>5  2 21  9  13  34  39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>38  4  10</td>
<td>5  1 22  19  20  24  38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>49 10 8</td>
<td>4  0 8  7  7  19  49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry/writing</td>
<td>48  2  11</td>
<td>6  1 10  8  10  17  48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>22  9  19</td>
<td>7  5 19  26  27  28  22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual arts</td>
<td>30  11 13</td>
<td>14  4 9  14  23  26  30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45 participants indicated that they had taken part in other personal learning activities, outside those listed in the chart. The range and scope of the activities listed were highly diverse and included physical activities such as scuba diving and coaching certification, as well as learning in the natural world—canoe training, bee keeping, and astronomy. Other arts-related learning involved community theatre, film production, face painting, and candle making. Home renovations, post and beam construction courses, and boat building were also listed, as were certifications in first aid, prenatal training, and pilot’s and motorcycle licenses. Rounding out the activities were second language learning, political activity, and dog training.

In the next section, I examine how elementary teachers in each of the four career stages participate in personal learning and how their learning has changed across their careers.

38
Stage 1: Newly Qualified

The 34 newly qualified teachers who participated in this study generally found it difficult to make time for personal learning experiences, as most of their time was spent focusing on professional responsibilities and taking additional qualifications courses. Again and again, participants lamented about the lack of time they had for personal learning: “The amount of time I spend on planning and marking completely precludes taking courses that are outside of the realm of AQs and in-service job-skills” (male, 40s, GTA); “As I have been given increased work responsibilities, I find the amount of time that I can devote to non-work-related activities has been very limited. Often most of this personal learning occurs over the summer months” (female, 50s, southern Ontario). Another explained, “Time is the most determining factor. I would love to explore more learning opportunities if I had more time. Work takes up much of my time, I have 43 students in a French Immersion school” (female, 30s, GTA).

When participants found time for personal learning, it generally involved health and fitness activities. “In addition to teaching, I spend a lot of time on professional courses (AQ, ABQ, community college), so I have not gained enough opportunity for hobbies aside from maintaining general fitness routines” (female, 20s, GTA). This sentiment was echoed by another teacher who wrote, “I only have time for fitness and dance learning to wind down after busy work days . . . there is less time for formal learning due to planning and marking” (female, 30s, eastern Ontario).

While many newly qualified participants expressed difficulty finding time and energy for personal learning, those who were not working full-time in the profession noted that they enjoyed partaking in new personal learning activities and had experienced increased confidence as learners as a result of their personal learning. One participant explained that her personal learning has already changed throughout her short career in that it has expanded. She has become more open to trying new things, such as photography and visual art that, in the past, she was not comfortable with. The
factors that have impacted her increased personal learning opportunities are improved finances ("With more money I can become involved in more ‘formalized’ activities") and a general, increased interest in trying new things (female, 20s, southwestern Ontario).

Stage 2: Established Within the Profession

Twenty-three participants, each with between 6 and 15 years of teaching experience at the time of this study, fall into the second career stage, which I refer to as established within the profession. When they explained how their personal learning has changed since the beginning of their careers, two central themes emerged: (a) family responsibilities, and (b) shift from professional to personal.

The most striking, common theme was the struggle of these teachers to participate in learning activities because of limitations (financial and time) due to family responsibilities. Participants explained, “When I first started teaching I was not married and participated in a lot of personal learning. Once I got married it became less as I had more household responsibilities and I moved further from my school district. Once I had a child it lessened even more” (female, 30s, southwestern Ontario). This sentiment was echoed by many others who wrote of “just wanting to be home,” “being tired after work,” and “decreased opportunities for personal learning.”

Family responsibilities not only decreased the time available for teachers to pursue personal learning, but also changed the kinds of learning they engaged in. One participant noted, “I am now choosing learning opportunities that benefit my family as well as the classroom” (female, 30s, eastern Ontario). This was echoed by another who explained, “As parental responsibilities draw on my time more and more, I find my personal learning content becoming more and more informal and utilitarian—handyman, woodworker, landscaper and early childhood educator, I suppose” (male, 30s, eastern Ontario). Many participants who indicated that they have continued to pursue personal learning interests throughout their careers also explained that they did not have any
children or family responsibilities. “My learning hasn’t really changed. Perhaps I do a bit less now because I am so busy with work during the days, but I have no kids so that doesn’t interfere” (female, 30s, southern Ontario).

Another prominent theme in this career stage was a shift from professional learning with a goal to climb the pay scale to learning that was more relevant to their particular classroom needs and personal interests. One participant wrote, “As a beginning teacher I was more focused on taking AQ and ABQ courses in order to move up the grid with QECO,” echoing a reality for many new teachers looking to increase their income. Another explained how “initially my participation in learning was of the more formal/academic variety. As I have matured, made increasingly more contacts, and grown more confident in who I am as a teacher I have found meaningful personal development opportunities in other realms” (female, 30s, central Ontario). Another participant reported:

In the beginning, the learning was focused on augmenting/benefitting my career (e.g., what can I learn in order to make further contributions to my teaching). Eventually, learning in and of itself became the focus. Enjoying it, needing the outlets, providing a better and more balanced quality of life. (female, 30s, GTA)

Stage 3: Reassessing their Careers

The third career stage includes teachers who have been working in the profession for 16 to 24 years and are typically in the midst of reassessing their career path and goals. Sixteen participants in the study fell under this category. As in the earlier career stage, family responsibilities were a prominent feature. In this stage, however, many of the participants indicated that their children had become more independent, which allowed for a renewed ability to engage in personal learning. One woman explained, “I have been able to take part in more activities now as my children are young
adults. I did take courses when they were younger, but my time and learning were limited” (female, 50s, central Ontario). Another described:

As my children have grown, I have more time to explore my own interests—particularly writing and photography. I like to pursue work-related, self-directed education avenues, such as finding out more about children's mental health issues to program for an emotionally disturbed student. . . . Overall I find formal learning less appealing and look for opportunities to develop my own interests, and thus learn more about myself and connect with others who share my interests and passions. (female, 50s, GTA)

Participants in this career stage not only found more time to explore their own personal learning interests, they also showed a desire to have control over the kinds of learning they engaged in. One participant explained:

In the last few years we have been told through our school board what our professional development will be, teachers were not always given a choice. I find that I have more interest in learning experiences that I choose and not ones that are prescribed for me. (female, 40s, eastern Ontario)

Those who indicated they had a choice in their learning wrote that their learning was “more focused on technology to keep up with the times,” was relevant to their students, and allowed them “to take real-life examples back to the classroom.” Another participant stated, “I have always been interested in health and fitness. At this stage I feel that health and fitness are required for me to be the best teacher I can be” (female, 50s, central Ontario). The participants’ descriptions of learning opportunities that are self-directed, linked to previous experience, and situated in a context that is important to the learner indicate that relevancy is an important factor of learning for teachers in this career stage.
Stage 4: Final Years

With more than 25 years of teaching experience, the nine participants in this study who were in their final years of teaching shared three common themes when they described how their personal learning has changed throughout their careers: (a) intention, (b) time, and (c) confidence.

The first theme, intention, demonstrates how the reasons motivating learning choices changed as their careers progressed. One participant wrote, “Early in my career it was primarily academic learning focused on additional qualifications, diversification and promotion. Later in my career it was more personal growth (interest) related and more risk was involved (trying something just to have the experience)” (female, 50s, southern Ontario). Another echoed this sentiment, noting that early in her teaching career, when her children were young, she chose activities they were involved in, such as teaching Girl Guides and Sunday school. She also took courses to further her education and increase her income potential. Later on, most of her learning had to do with personal growth, swimming, fitness, cooking, crafts, and reading for enjoyment (female, 50s, southern Ontario).

The significance of time was woven through many of the descriptions given by participants. One explained that, “family responsibilities definitely take up more of your time and influence your opportunity to take additional courses. Work responsibilities and expectations have increased throughout the years which also interferes with time available for learning” (female, 50s, central Ontario). Another said, “As I get busier (during the school year, with family obligations, household duties, extracurricular events), I have to fit my extended learning into e-learning, breakfast speaker series, and surfing educational websites” (female, 50s, eastern Ontario).

Confidence was a final theme that appeared in many of the comments. One participant in particular articulated how her increased self-assurance affected her learning throughout her career:
As I became more knowledgeable and comfortable in my role as a teacher I was able to devote more time to my own personal learning because I did not feel as obligated to take courses and workshops directly related to my educational responsibilities but instead, I chose to learn about things that were personally of interest to me. (female, 50s, eastern Ontario)

It is important to note that career stage and family responsibilities were not the only factors that determined a participant’s perspective and participation in personal learning. Age was also a determining factor. For example, some participants who were in the second career stage were in their 50s and 60s; they seemed to be more interested in balance and personal well-being, and really sought out personal learning opportunities. As one participant explained, “As I get older and closer to retirement, more of the personal learning focuses on my own interests, such as gardening, and some overlap with work-related, such as sketching” (female, 60s, GTA).

Discussion

Research suggests that teachers’ professional learning changes throughout their careers (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2007). The findings presented above demonstrate that personal learning also changes throughout their careers. The open-ended responses of the survey participants indicate that there are indeed differences in the kinds of learning opportunities that elementary teachers engage in across different career stages. In the first stage, the newly qualified teachers, within their first five years of teaching, generally do not have time to participate in personal learning. Those who work full-time in classrooms are only able to participate in professional-development, formal courses that provide opportunities for salary increases; they work to keep their heads above the water as they juggle the many facets of classroom teaching. The few who find time for balance and personal well-being squeeze in time for fitness and health.

In the second stage, the teachers who are established within the profession, with between 6 and 15 years of teaching experience, often find that their family responsibilities limit their time for
personal learning opportunities. Those without children or those whose children are becoming more independent find that they have increased confidence in themselves as teachers and are more able and willing to take time for their own personal interests.

Teachers in the third phase, who have between 16 and 24 years of teaching experience, indicate that, while family remained a significant factor in their ability to engage in personal learning opportunities, for most this responsibility has lessened. As a result the teachers are participating in learning that is relevant to their personal lives and interests—often including taking time for their own personal health and well-being.

In the final career stage, the elementary teachers with more than 25 years of teaching experience explain that almost all of their learning involves personal growth. Although finding time remains a challenge, the teachers’ interest in balance and personal well-being really takes the forefront in this final stage of the career. Participants in this category seem to value learning that focuses on personal growth and are more willing to take risks and try new learning activities just for the experience. Some examples include spiritual retreats, researching personal history and artifacts, fine arts, and second-language learning.

In all four of the career stages, personal learning is both inhibited and enhanced by life. For instance, although one’s opportunities for personal learning may be limited in scope due to parental responsibilities, the learning that occurs as a result of parenthood provides ample opportunity for personal growth. The same can be said for times when personal health and well-being become a central focus for the participants. In many cases, a feeling of being overwhelmed, frenzied, or burnt-out was the catalyst for the teachers to learn to take care of themselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Again, a constraint resulted in the participants enriching their lives through learning for themselves. This perspective was echoed by participants in all career stages, who told of learning to fix or repair household items and vehicles or to mend and sew clothing.
Malcolm Knowles (1950) wrote that adults should develop a dynamic attitude toward life. He explained that this meant adults should “accept the fact of change and should think of themselves as always changing. They should acquire the habit of looking at every experience as an opportunity to learn and should become skillful in learning from it” (p. 9). Certainly, the participants in this study—across all four career stages—perceived many everyday experiences as opportunities for rich and meaningful learning.

The learning described by the teachers in this study took place in an informal setting far more often than in a formal or non-formal setting. This indicates that most of the personal learning that elementary teachers engage in generally results from their daily experiences, influences, and resources in their environment—family and neighbours, leisure activities, daily tasks, the library, and mass media. Further, the participants’ personal learning involves interactions amongst family, coworkers, or community members. This is supported by the work of Alan Knox (1977) who proposed that the social contexts of family and community profoundly influence adult development and learning. The findings are also highly reflective of the Canadian research on informal learning conducted by Tough (1971) and Livingstone (2001), that determined the range and magnitude of informal learning that adults take part in. In *The Adult Learning Projects*, Allen Tough discovered that approximately 90% of the Canadians he interviewed had taken part in some sort of intentional learning in the past year. Even more striking, is that both researchers found that about 20% of all major learning efforts were institutionally organized or offered through a driving school instructor or a private piano teacher. The other 80% was informal. In the next chapter, I consider those features of informal or personal learning that the participants found to be most engaging.
Chapter 4

Features of Engaged Learning for Elementary Teachers

“The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.”

T.H. White, The Once and Future King

Research on teachers’ roles in student engagement has centred on teachers’ dispositions, instructional methods, and expectations (McCaslin, 2006; Noddings, 1984; Palmer, 1998; Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan, 2008). However, to date, there has been little exploration into how teachers’ engagement in their own learning affects and encourages engagement in student learning. Contributing to this lack of research is a narrowly defined understanding of teacher learning, a term that refers to improving instructional practice and, in turn, raising student achievement (Borko, 2004, p. 3). There has been considerable research on formal and informal teacher learning in these areas (Delhi & Fumia, 2002; Lohman, 2006; Smaller et al., 2000). However, there has not been substantial research on the features of engaging learning contexts for teachers or how these features affect the teachers themselves. The research reported in this chapter seeks to characterize the richness of engaged personal learning in the lives of elementary teachers, and to provide an enhanced sense of the reported effects of personal learning on the elementary teachers themselves.

When examining the personal learning of elementary teachers, it is important to consider the meaning of engaged learning and how it relates to adult learners. In the first section, I explore the construct of engaged learning in order to provide an operational definition. This is followed by an
examination of the conceptual and empirical literature regarding features of engaged learning in adults.

**Literature**

**Engagement**

Engagement is a multifaceted construct related to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive outcomes. Researchers have generally defined behavioural engagement in terms of participation in academic and social or extracurricular activities in school. Indicators of behavioural engagement include exhibiting on-task behaviour, asking relevant questions, solving task-related problems, and participating in relevant discussion with teachers and/or peers (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Valeski & Stipek, 2001). Cognitive engagement levels are measured by students’ use of cognitive, metacognitive, and self-regulatory strategies to monitor and guide their learning processes. From this viewpoint, engagement is a motivated behaviour, indicated by the kinds of cognitive strategies students choose to use and by their willingness to persist with difficult tasks through self-regulation (Blumenfeld & Meece, 1988; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Emotional engagement is indicated by high levels of interest and/or positive attitudes toward learning tasks. This kind of engagement is defined in terms of both positive and negative reactions to instructors, peers, and context, as well as in terms of how such reactions influence learners’ willingness to complete tasks and form ties to each other and to their work (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Marks, 2000).

In reviewing definitions, measures, precursors, and outcomes of engagement, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) argued that engagement has considerable potential as a multidimensional construct that unites behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement in a meaningful way. In particular, they suggested that engagement can be thought of as a “meta” construct (p. 60). This is not to say that other constructs cannot be used to examine engagement in learning. Motivation, task difficulty, self-efficacy, and self-confidence may also play an important
role in learner engagement, particularly in the contexts of emotional and behavioural engagement (Battistich et al., 1997; Burleson, 2006). This multifaceted conception of engagement was echoed by Skinner and Belmont (1993), who stated:

Engagement versus disaffection in school refers to the intensity and emotional quality of children's involvement in initiating and carrying out learning activities. . . Children who are engaged show sustained behavioural involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. (p. 572)

Engagement needs to be understood within the contexts in which it is jointly constructed. Behaviour, emotion, and cognition are dynamically interrelated within the individual learner.

Studying engagement by considering this interrelationship may provide a more comprehensive characterization of learners than is possible when researching a single component. In order to determine what engaged learning looks like, it is also important to define what is meant by learning. Learning can be described as the process of transforming information and experience into knowledge, skills, behaviours, values, or attitudes. Therefore, I define engaged learning as being wholly involved in the process of transforming information and experience into knowledge, skills, behaviours, values, or attitudes. In the following section, I apply this definition of engaged learning to look at how adults pursue and take part in learning.

Features of Engaged Learning in Adults

Unlike children, who are legally required to be enrolled in formal learning until the age of 18 or until high school graduation (Ontario Education Act, 2007), adults generally choose why, how, and when to pursue learning opportunities. Illeris (2009) explained that it is characteristic of adults to learn what they want to learn and to have very little inclination to acquire something they do not perceive as meaningful for their own life goals. As a result, rather than having various unconnected
learning motives, adults have more coherent strategies, relating to goals that are often fairly clear and known to the individual. The literature on adult engagement in learning—especially empirical work—is limited. This may be due to the assumption that adult learners are engaged because they have choice in their learning. As such, the literature reviewed in this section addresses the prominent features of engaged adult learning.

Opportunities for adult engagement in learning are enhanced when the learning (a) is relevant to the lives and experiences of the learners (Illeris, 2009), and (b) allows learners to be critically reflective (Merriam, 2008). Relevancy is a term that encompasses a number of qualities. I use relevancy to describe learning opportunities that are self-directed, linked to previous experience, and situated in a context that is important to the learner. Critical reflection encompasses occasions for learning that are flexible, that challenge the learners’ ideas and beliefs, and that occur in a safe and supportive environment (Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2001). I elaborate on each below.

**Relevancy.** Learning in adulthood is engaging when it is connected to the learners’ goals and needs and to their previous experiences, and when it is situated in a context that is relevant to the learners’ life. Adults are selective and goal-oriented in their learning, as their specific learning needs are typically generated by real-life tasks or problems (Illeris, 2009). As a result, adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or to do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives. MacKeracher (1996) suggested that adults are most likely to be engaged in their learning when it has relevance for them, as determined by their current meanings, needs, life tasks, roles, and personal interests.

There has been much discussion on what constitutes self-directed learning. Knowles (1975) suggested that the term refers to a process in which individuals take the lead “in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning,
choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18).

Self-directed learning was found to be a key source of engagement in a five-year, qualitative study on adult learners’ engagement and how it was fostered in formal learning settings. Beder, Tomkins, Medina, Riccioni, & Deng, (2006) determined that the most significant source of high engagement in learning is the learners’ own goals. Most of the adult learners interviewed had explicit career goals and most wanted to continue on to postsecondary education. These findings demonstrate that engagement is enhanced when adult learners need or want to achieve a goal in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives.

Candy (1991) suggested that self-direction comprises both process and product. He referred to four distinct, but related, phenomena: (a) personal autonomy; (b) self-management, or the willingness to conduct one’s own education; (c) learner-control in the learning setting; and (d) “the individual, non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in the ‘natural societal setting’” (p. 23). He explained that learning in its fullest context is the interdependence of social activity and the attainment of full personal autonomy—both in the learning and outside of it. The attainment of personal independence in one’s learning is a key aspect of self-directed learning. When learning is self-directed, the individual can connect new learning with previous experience—a longstanding feature of adult learning in any context (MacKeracher, 1996; Marsick et al., 2009; Merriam, 2008). Adults’ life experiences become a valuable foundation as they continue to learn and adapt to new circumstances in life and in work. Knowles (1975) noted that adults’ experiences are a rich resource for learning; they learn through their own and each other’s experiences.

The adult learners’ real-life experiences play an important role in engaged learning. In fact, situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991) has long been recognized as a significant way of learning for adults. The two main principles of situated cognition are that (a) knowledge needs to be
presented in an authentic context (i.e., in settings and applications that would normally involve that knowledge); and (b) learning requires social interaction and collaboration (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This sentiment is echoed by Wilson, who has claimed that, in order to understand the central place of context in thinking and learning, “we have to recognize that cognition is a social activity that incorporates the mind, the body, the activity, and the ingredients of the setting in a complex, interactive, and recursive manner” (1993, p. 76).

Marsick et al. (2009) found that the interaction of context and information for adult learners relies on collaboration with others. From this perspective, adult learning is understood as both socially situated and socially constructed. The term social cognitive theory acknowledges the social origins of human thought and action, as well as the cognitive thought processes influencing our motivation and actions. Bandura (1986) analyzed human motivation, thought, and action from this perspective. Social cognitive theory emphasizes reciprocal determinism, which refers to the reciprocal relationship and interaction that exists among environmental factors, personal factors, and behaviour. In a study of formal workplace learning, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) explored how secondary school teachers in England learn at work. The findings emphasized the social and communal dimensions of learning and suggested that personal relationships are significant in adult learning.

In a related study, researchers examined two interdisciplinary graduate programs (Newswander & Borrego, 2009). The results of this qualitative study indicated that interpersonal connections and interactive teaching and learning facilitated positive learning experiences for adults. All collaborative learning is not positive and there are certainly challenges involved in collaborative undertakings. Stead and Harrington (2000) provide useful criteria to foster positive and productive collaborative learning. Their criteria include (a) a well-organized process, (b) strong and meaningful relationships among individuals, (c) reasonable and clear expectations, and (d) complementary
capacities of collaborators (p. 325). The scholars and researchers noted above have demonstrated that learning is engaging for adults when it is self-directed, linked to previous experience, and situated in a context that is important to the learner.

**Critical Reflection.** Encouraging reflection and dialogue, whether with the self, another, or a group, enables learning to take place (Merriam, 2008). Mezirow (1990) stated, “perhaps even more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances” (p. 5). He maintained that the real significance of adult learning appears when learners begin to reevaluate their lives and to remake them. For Mezirow, critical reflection takes precedence over whatever it was they set out to “learn” in the first place.

In addition, reflection has been defined as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). It has also been described as a process of reconsidering experience through reason, and reinterpreting and generalizing the experience to form mental structures (Cranton, 2006). However defined, learning to reflect—especially in a critical manner—is itself a developmental process that needs to be fostered in adult learning settings. The significance of reflection is not new. For almost a century, this notion has continued to be an important feature in learner engagement and, as such, reinforces the centrality of the construct.

In a study of informal learning, Rossing (1991) explored individuals’ beliefs about the context and actions that contributed to effective learning in a rural community enhancement group. He found that “participants were most likely to report . . . a ‘learning’ experience when strong expectations were contradicted somehow, and the individual subsequently revised his or her beliefs” (p. 57). These findings are significant in that they illustrate how reflection on one’s beliefs is important to adult learning.
Cranton (2006) distinguished between content, process, and premise reflection (Mezirow, 1991). Content reflection involves an examination of the content or description of a problem. Process reflection involves checking on the problem-solving strategies being used and reflecting on the process of understanding the problem. Premise reflection challenges the very basis of the problem or issue, and has the potential to promote transformation within the learner. In order for premise reflection to occur, learning needs to take place in a supportive community where people feel free to speak their truth, where blaming and judging are minimal, where full participation is encouraged, where a premium is placed on mutual understanding, but also where evidence and arguments may be assessed objectively and assumptions surfaced openly. (Daloz, 2000, p. 114)

Dirkx (2001) echoed the significance of a safe and caring environment in his discussion of the power of feelings in adult learning. He argued that personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and derived from the adult’s emotional, imaginitive connection with the self, and with the broader social world. He suggested that, in many formal learning contexts, the emotional issues that adult learners bring to the educational setting are perceived as “baggage” or “barriers” to learning. He noted that, if and when such issues are acknowledged, it is often to “provide opportunities for learners to ‘vent’ and ‘get it off their chests’ so that they can get back to the ‘business of learning’” (p. 67). But dismissing the learner’s emotional context in this manner can be detrimental to critical reflection and the establishment of a supportive community.

In describing a recent study of teachers’ beliefs about adult students’ preparedness for learning, Dirkx further explained how emotional and affective dimensions of learning are seen as factors that contribute to a positive educational experience (Gray & Dirkx, 2000). In recalling incidents of memorable learning, participants in the study described experiences in which there was a strong, positive, emotional, or affective dimension, such as a supportive climate, a caring teacher
who listens to learners as individuals, a teacher who respects learners as persons, or a teacher who involves the whole person in the learning experience.

The literature considered above has established that relevancy and critical reflection are important features of engagement in adult learning. While there are other features that are not considered in this study, the research reported in this chapter was undertaken, in part, to learn if these two features are central to the personal learning of elementary teachers. Another purpose for the present research is to characterize the richness of engaged personal learning in the lives of elementary teachers and to provide an enriched sense of the reported effects of this learning on the participants themselves. The data for this chapter were derived from the 87 open responses to the survey question, “Please describe a learning experience when you were very engaged. What qualities do you think made this learning enjoyable for you?” The data also resulted from the eleven interviews conducted with participants. In particular, the questions relating to personal interest and motivations offered most of the data. The specific questions asked were “Why do you take part in these experiences?” and “Were there any aspects of the learning experience that caused you to struggle?” In the subsequent section, quotations from the participants are presented with information detailing their gender, career stage, age, and geographic location. The four career stages are signified using the following acronyms: Newly qualified (NQ), Established Within the Profession (EWP), Reassessing their Careers (RC), and Final Years (FY).

Findings

The participants reported experiencing positive and engaged learning when the learning opportunities challenged and extended their knowledge in real-life contexts and/or when the learning was social or collaborative in nature. These two themes, (a) authentic challenge and (b) shared experience, are described below.
Authentic Challenge

Authenticity emerged as a theme when participants discussed their experiences of learning opportunities that were self-directed, challenging, and connected to their personal needs and interests. Many descriptions of engaged learning involved accomplishing goals that were challenging. One participant stated that she was always engaged when the learning challenged her and gave her a deeper understanding of the experience (female, RC, 50s, central Ontario). Another described her most engaging learning experience as one that involved a variety of individuals with differing backgrounds working collaboratively to achieve a shared goal. She explained that each of the participants approached their goal from a very different perspective and that the resulting conversations both challenged her thinking and motivated her to seek out more information (female, NQ, 30s, southern Ontario).

Others spoke of the specific challenges associated with physical activity and the learning that has occurred as a result. The following descriptions are related to embodied learning—the notion that we learn with our bodies through experiences that engage the body, senses, emotions, and imagination as well as the intellect (Bresler, 2004). One female participant described how the most joyful learning in her life was related to what she has been able to accomplish through physical adversity and challenge. As a runner, she explained that, after injuries and setbacks, resuming with training and racing was extremely exciting and a tremendous challenge (female, EWP, 40s, eastern Ontario).

Another participant spoke of his learning in a physical sport and how his perseverance and determination helped him to attain his goals and feel very satisfied with his learning. He said, with laughter, that fencing has brought him joy but also horrible anguish. While he has experienced gradual improvement, surmounting a plateau and reaching a new level of skill can be a very long
road, taking years to achieve success. “I’ve had to work harder to get where I am so that’s why I feel pretty good about it I guess…a lot of frustrations (male, NQ, 20s, eastern Ontario).

A different kind of physicality was shared by a participant who told of his learning in building his son a cradle:

The sense of pride and accomplishment, you know when you’ve done it yourself, and maybe it’s been a struggle, but in the end it worked out and you’re comfortable with the end result? It’s a part of the world that isn’t prefab, it wasn’t made for you, you didn’t buy it, you kind of articulated it, you made it your own. I guess, I mean I don’t think anything I make is beautiful by any stretch of the imagination but there’s a kind of a beauty in that... and ownership and it’s empowering. (male, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

Sometimes the challenges stemmed from working collaboratively. “I love making music with other people but sometimes in the sharing of ideas, when we’re as personal as we are about our music, it can get testy and you can step on people’s toes and so there’s negotiation” (male, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario). When learning together as a group, the unintentional learning that occurs through overcoming the challenges of social interactions, negotiations, and compromise can be as striking as the intended learning outcomes.

In addition to overcoming challenges, the analysis showed that learning tasks are meaningful and engaging when participants are able to learn about topics that are important to them, or that they have had a say in selecting. Regardless of whether they were describing cooking classes, a gardening series, or learning to knit, participants consistently portrayed their most engaging learning as being “practical,” “applicable,” and “of personal interest.”

Whether the learning experience is fulfilling a need or providing some balance in the lives of the participants, the responses have shown that, in most cases, the learner has chosen to partake in the experience.
I go because I want to go and because I know when I come back I’ll have gained so much. I feel like I’m also a better person at home because I’ve had time away and I’m filling my cup but I’m not filling it at anyone else’s expense. (female, RC, 40s, eastern Ontario)

The following account illustrates how one participant chose to partake in a learning opportunity that was both important to him and self-directed:

There’s a workshop, well really a garage, that was rotting into the ground when we moved into our house and I wanted to save it. It looks like a barn but it’s just 20x20 and it kinda had a loft and I thought, oh I want to put my tools in there. I like turning bowls on a lathe, I have my grandfather’s lathe and I want to set it up. So I started to work in there but it was damp and it had a dirt floor, so the next summer with the help of my neighbours I actually lifted the whole thing up in the air with a forklift and a tractor and then made the wall true, and straightened everything out, reinforced and rebuilt some walls, and then I made a form and poured a concrete floor. Then I ran two courses of cinderblocks around the edges of the walls so that I had eight feet of height and I didn’t have to lean over. Then I insulated it, put steel on the outside, rewired, and insulated it, and it’s a real building now. (male, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

He continued on, telling me that he didn’t really know what he was doing until he carried out each individual task. He explained that, in his neighbourhood, there was an electrician who lived on one corner, a mason down the street, and a carpenter down another street, and they would all come and give him advice. “It was humbling” he noted, “but I learned a lot and now I have this great workspace.” Not only did this learning opportunity challenge and extend the participant’s knowledge in a real-life context, but it was also shared by his neighbours. This social feature of engaged learning is detailed below.

Shared Experience

Many participants discussed how their positive and engaging learning experiences were often shared within a supportive group or with another individual. One participant described how jamming sessions with guitar players of all levels—having fun and teaching each other—was a most enjoyable learning experience because “collaborative learning is a very engaging process when we
know, trust and respect each other” (female, FY, 50s, eastern Ontario). This was echoed by another participant, who told of her involvement in a book club on nonfiction topics such as religion, politics, and the environment. She explained that the discussions were “enjoyable because they were topics we were all interested in. We all had significant background knowledge from our readings and ideas and comments were listened to without negative comments, even if not everyone agreed with them” (female, EWP, 60s, eastern Ontario). The notion of learning together in a safe, positive environment was prominent in both descriptions.

Another salient aspect of learning collaboratively is the rate at which knowledge is gained. One participant explained:

Learning to play the guitar has been the most enjoyable and engaging experience for me. I was learning with friends in an informal setting, learning songs that were of interest to me. It was a social experience more than anything, but I did learn much faster than if I had taken on the challenge without a group to learn with. (female, NQ, 20s, central Ontario)

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who described a formal learning experience, in which she was introduced to technology and social media and learned to communicate with her teenage daughters online:

Learning about technology and social media in a formal yet really personal way—I wasn’t afraid anymore. I had my own Facebook account, I knew what [my daughters] were talking about, I knew what the acronyms were, and I learned it in a really supportive environment. . . there’s really nowhere else I think I would’ve gotten up to speed that fast and been so unafraid to try stuff. (female, RC, 50s, GTA)

When participants described sharing their informal learning with another individual it most often involved a spouse, partner, or parent. In his informal learning of photography, one participant
spoke of how his wife had helped him to develop his artistic eye and how he helped her to more accurately frame her photos. He described her as being

very artistic, she has the artistic eye and so she just doesn’t snap a picture. We work really well together in the sense that she’ll be trying to get a picture and I’ll say, but if you move to this direction just you know 6 feet, the angle will change it, and so together we can, we get some nice pictures I think. (male, FY, 50s, central Ontario)

Another participant described a lengthy, shared learning project he has undertaken with his father. For the past eight summers, together the father and son have extensively landscaped the father’s property. Each year they add something new, whether a rock garden, a pond, or a garden. He described this as being an “important time spent together, working and learning and spending time” (male, NQ, 20s, eastern Ontario). This was echoed by another participant, who explained how she has been learning about renovations from her partner. They bought an abandoned home and have been working together for the past eight years to restore the home, one project at a time:

There are things I can do independently now, from beginning to end that I couldn’t do before, like install a hardwood floor, build a closet. He’s a good teacher, but I’d like to become more independent as a woodworker, as a carpenter and less reliant on [him] to get me through. (female, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

For the participants in this research, positive and engaging learning was often shared with a supportive group or an individual with whom one has a safe and caring relationship. This shared experience increased the participant’s enjoyment of the activity and in some cases seemed to increase the rate at which the learning occurred.

Discussion

Although I anticipated many of the results, based on my own personal learning experiences and on the related literature, I was surprised by the very strong emphasis participants placed on the relational and self-directed aspects of the learning. This relates to the theme of authentic challenge for adult learners, in that opportunities are self-directed and important to the learner. Meaningful
opportunities also involve learners as active agents in the learning process. Learning in this way becomes more active through experimentation and inquiry, as well as through dialogue and questioning. This is also true for the participants, who were shown to be engaged in learning that was situated in a context that is both relevant and authentic.

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of flow is a construct that includes the notion of matching adequate challenge with skill. Characteristics of flow include a feeling of being in control, a state of concentration and highly focused attention, mental enjoyment of the activity for its own sake, a distorted sense of time, and a match between the challenge at hand and one’s skills. The theory suggests that people are most happy when they are in a state of flow—a state of concentration or complete absorption when fully immersed in an activity that requires a balance between skills and challenges. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) noted that flow also happens when a person’s skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so it acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing challenges. If challenges are too low, one may get back to flow by increasing them. If challenges are too great, one can return to the flow state by learning new skills. Csikszentmihalyi (1978) also reported that total engagement or flow experiences are self-rewarding. This quality, he suggested, engenders emergent motivation that contributes significantly to sustained inquiry and learning.

Meaningful activity, collaboration, and passion for learning are supported, legitimized, and nurtured within a community or culture that values such experiences and creates many opportunities for them to occur and to be accomplished with success and pleasure. Learning that is personally significant and meaningful was found to be grounded in and derived from an individual’s connection with the self, the learning community, and the broader social world. In this sense, supportive and nurturing learning communities play an important role in engaged learning.
The relational and self-directed features of the learning that participants described in this study bring the individuals enjoyment, pleasure, a sense of accomplishment, and a feeling of belonging and purpose. Indeed, it is difficult for participants to find and make the time for these kinds of learning endeavours, but the benefits are substantial. By making time for personal interests and goals, these teachers have found ways to experience new and meaningful challenges and to create some sense of balance between their personal and professional lives.

In this chapter, I have considered the construct of engaged learning and the features of engaged learning in adults. I characterized the richness of engaged personal learning in the lives of the elementary teacher participants and provided an enriched sense of the reported effects of personal learning on the elementary teachers themselves. In the next chapter, I examine the reported effects of engaged personal learning on teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school.
Chapter 5

Reported Effects of Engaged Personal Learning

In my first year in the profession, I was hired to teach a four-grade split in a remote community. Very quickly I felt overwhelmed, overworked, and as though nothing I could do would be enough to help my students. In the fall, an older gentleman who lived in the community began volunteering in our class. After a few weeks, he gently suggested that I might benefit from taking a little time to do something new for myself. One day, after class, he presented me with a fiddle that he didn’t use anymore—one that he would be happy to loan to me, if I’d like to give it a try. He stayed to show me a few things—how to tighten the strings and how to hold the instrument and bow. I took that fiddle home and I practiced every night, learning to play scales and simple melodies, like *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and *Ode to Joy*. A short while later, I brought the fiddle to class and shared my progress with my students. They knew that I was learning a new instrument and were eager to see how I was doing. Their eyes and mouths were wide as they witnessed me struggling through a simple song, realizing that I was a learner who struggled just like them. After that day, I brought my fiddle to class every Wednesday to share my growth and my challenges with my students—a meaningful experience for all.

The Ontario educational system encourages lifelong learning in students (Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, 1994). This aim is evident in the mission statements of numerous educational institutions and school boards that strive to help children “reach their full potential and continue along a path of lifelong learning” (Simcoe County District School Board, 2010) and to “embrace lifelong learning to be happy and productive citizens today and tomorrow” (Toronto District School Board, 2007). Given the rapid socio-economic and technological changes in our society, Kindergarten to Grade 12 education can only provide a foundation for the learning and
relearning that will take place throughout a student’s life. This education is the foundation of a learning society, one that is built on the acquisition, renewal, and use of knowledge as a basis for citizenship in rational, enlightened, and democratic societies (Delors, 1996).

The research reported in this chapter considers teachers who learn for their own personal interests and well-being, and explores elementary teachers’ reports that their engagement in personal learning affects their in-school practices, specifically the engagement of their students. In the following section, I examine both conceptual and empirical literature that conveys the features of engaged learning in elementary-aged students. This literature provides a framework to explore the ways in which the personal learning of elementary teachers impacts the engagement of the young learners in their classrooms.

**Features of Engaged Learning in Elementary Students**

Opportunities for engagement in learning are enhanced or promoted in elementary classrooms in at least two ways: (a) by offering children an environment where they feel cared for and are encouraged to care for others and their learning, and (b) by offering learning opportunities that challenge and extend children’s knowledge in real-life contexts (Marks, 2000; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Wasserstein, 1995). While these features of learning can be experienced independently, together they provide an environment and experiences likely to emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally engage children in their learning. Below, I explore two broad features of engagement—(a) caring environment, and (b) authentic challenge—as they have been presented by researchers in the fields of cognition and education. For the purposes of this review, elementary-aged students are children who are between the ages of 4 and 14, or who would be enrolled in grades Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8.
A Caring Environment

The feature of a caring learning environment for elementary students is comprised of at least two elements: (a) a sense of belonging, and (b) opportunities for collaboration.

Belonging. A sense of belonging is integral to positive learning spaces (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Schaps, 2002). Belonging is fostered in communities built on strong socio-personal and environmental relationships that are important to learning (Loughran, 1997). When there is a strong sense of community, connectedness, or belonging in a school, students are surrounded by a caring community. Kohl (1998) argued that schools of hope and honour are safe and welcoming places where the joy of learning and a sense of belonging are part of a convivial learning community. Here both teachers and students are free to innovate and express pride and ownership of their learning.

In her work, The Challenge to Care in Schools, Noddings (1992) suggested that today’s schools should be organized around themes of caring, where caring in the classroom not only consists of the teacher caring about the students, but also helping the students learn to develop the capacity to care for others and the environment around them. This notion of caring accentuates the role of belonging and the interconnection between students and their environment. Studies have shown that students who report caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school have more positive academic attitudes and values and are more satisfied with school (Battistich et al., 1997; Marks, 2000). Teacher support was also found to be of particular significance for elementary students who are engaged in academic tasks (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004). One premise in the present study is that, when elementary teachers themselves are engaged in supportive and nurturing learning opportunities, they will in turn provide this kind of environment for their students.

Following a cohort of students in 24 elementary schools across the United States from their entry into the schools in Kindergarten through to Grade 6, the findings of Battistich et al. (1997)
confirmed the importance of a sense of belonging. Elementary students’ sense of school as a caring community was reported to be strongly associated with their achievement motivation, intrinsic motivation for learning, and self-esteem.

In a related study, Marks (2000) demonstrated that a classroom environment in which students received support from both teachers and peers was associated with higher engagement among elementary, middle, and high school students in schools undergoing reforms. In her study of more than 3500 students in Grades 5, 8, and 10, she examined both behavioural and emotional engagement in 143 mathematics and social studies classrooms. Using identical student surveys across all three grade levels, this study investigated patterns of engagement in students during instructional activities and also investigated whether or not the patterns were consistent at various stages of schooling. Like the work of Battistich et al. (1997) described above, social support for learning was shown to contribute substantially to student engagement at all three grade levels. A positive school environment—defined as a school culture in which student learning is supported and encouraged, learners are respected, expectations in the classroom are high, and class members help each other learn—was also a contributing factor that increased a sense of belonging and engagement in schooling.

Collaboration. Collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of approaches in education that involve the social nature of learning. It requires collaboration amongst peers who are engaged in a common task. Collaborative learning has its roots in social constructivist theory, and has been associated with Vygotsky’s (1978) belief that students are capable of performing at higher levels when expected to work in collaborative situations than when asked to work individually. In this type of learning, group members are interdependent in the performance of their task and must interact in order to complete it. The essential element that defines collaborative learning is the generation of shared meaning amongst pairs or group members through an iterative discussion.
process (Webb & Palinscar, 1996). Several studies further elaborate on this element of collaborative learning to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this form of learning contributes to student engagement.

Collaborative learning is also related to the notion of social learning, as established in Bandura’s (1976) work on the significance of close, social ties for learning. Social-learning theorists claim that people learn from one another through actions such as observation, imitation, and modelling—all of which are present in elementary collaborative learning situations. Studies have shown that when students are given the opportunity to work cooperatively with their peers on learning tasks, their interest in learning is stimulated (Helme & Clarke, 2001; Sharan & Tan, 2008; Vellos, 2009).

In a related, multimethod study of twenty-four middle school students in seven mathematics classrooms in Australia, researchers used student and teacher interviews, prompted by video recordings of classroom events, to measure cognitive engagement (Helme & Clarke, 2001). Using behavioural indicators such as concentration, questioning, self-monitoring, gesturing, and making evaluative comments, the researchers documented more instances of cognitive engagement in student-student interactions than in student-teacher interactions. Although Helme and Clarke did not examine the extent to which collaboration supports a multifaceted understanding of engagement, including behavioural and emotional aspects, their findings align with the work of Sharan and Shaulov (1990) who have noted that students’ identification with one another in a collective pursuit of knowledge is probably one of the factors that accounts for the distinct increase in students’ motivation to learn. Engagement in the collective pursuit of knowledge that results from collaborative work is even stronger when students feel a sense of ownership in their learning. Below, I explore how the features of belonging and collaboration are enhanced when elementary learners are provided with opportunities to challenge and extend their knowledge in real-life contexts.
Authentic Challenge

The feature of authentic challenge for elementary students is comprised of (a) ownership of learning, (b) authenticity, and (c) overcoming challenge.

Ownership. Learning tasks become meaningful for students when they are able to learn about topics that are important to them, or that they have had a say in selecting. The idea of ownership in learning is a basic principle of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood education (Gandini, 1993). In Reggio settings, the curriculum is emergent. That is, it is often started by an idea, event, or problem posed by one or more children. In a study of a Reggio preschool, Prasertsintanah (2008) noted that teachers trusted, respected, and valued the children’s sense of ownership, autonomy, and control of their own learning and play. Purposeful play was the core of the learning program. The teachers believed that learning occurred when children were guided to accomplish something meaningful to them.

The feature of ownership is reaffirmed in the writing of educational philosopher John Dewey (1902), who stressed the importance of balanced interaction between a child’s nature and the curriculum. He stated that subject matter needs to have an organic connection with a child’s interest and level of maturation so that the child’s reasoning powers and motivation are engaged. This conception of ownership was applied in one study by Smithrim, Garbati, and Upitis (in press). In a study of the relationship between rhythm and Grade 1 student engagement in three different school contexts, nine researchers conducted a series of observations in a total of nine classrooms: four Waldorf classrooms, three public school classrooms, and two university laboratory school classrooms. The teams conducted six days of observation in total, two consecutive days at each school. Data were collected in two forms. One researcher in each classroom documented the description of classroom activities, while other researchers documented levels of student engagement, using a variation of the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (Laevers, 1994).
Researchers noted that when students were involved in conversations in pairs and small groups about questions raised by the students themselves, engagement was high. Smithrim and her colleagues observed high levels of engagement when students had complete ownership over what type of figure they would create in an art activity. Researchers also found that, when children were involved in an activity over which they had less ownership, they took more time to begin their work, spent more time wandering around looking at others’ work, and were generally less engaged. These features of ownership and choice of learning activities were also highlighted in a qualitative study on student engagement in reading (Worthy, 1998). Using semi-structured interviews and audiotaped conversations between two disengaged readers in a Grade 6 language arts class, the research revealed that boys were passionate about reading self-selected materials outside of school. The findings indicate that when adolescent students have some control over learning materials and the opportunity to discuss ideas with their peers, in-school engagement in reading is improved. Again, the present study examines whether ownership is a salient feature of adult learning and if so, how teachers who experience ownership in their own personal learning endeavours might bring this feature to their classroom teaching.

**Authenticity.** As a feature of enhanced student engagement, authentic instructional work involves learning that is cognitively challenging and connected to the world beyond the classroom. According to Marks (2000), authentic instructional work is a powerful contributor to the engagement of elementary, middle-, and high-school students because it involves them in solving meaningful problems that are relevant in the world beyond the classroom and are of personal interest to students.

The significance of authenticity as a feature of engaged learning has been supported by researchers and scholars in education for more than a century. The longevity of this idea is evidenced in the works of both John Dewey and Alfred Whitehead. Two characteristics of rich
learning, which Dewey stressed in *Democracy and Education* (1916), are related to authenticity. First, he noted that learning experiences must be rich, relevant, and manipulative in nature so that the students can relate these experiences to their everyday lives. He also recognized that experience shapes the child’s encounter with the world in matters of perception that are similar to the behaviour of a working professional.

In his work, *The Aims of Education* (1929), Whitehead also emphasized the importance of a learner’s connection to the learning. He noted that children should take ideas introduced in school and make them their own, and that understanding the application of learning in one’s own life is essential to learning. Whitehead’s appeal for useful knowledge underscores the importance of students making personal connections with their learning.

Authentic, personal connections to learning may occur through cognitive apprenticeship—a theory of the process where a master of a skill teaches that skill to an apprentice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). This theory supports learning by enabling students to acquire, develop, and use cognitive tools in authentic activity. One kind of learning environment that facilitates this notion of cognitive apprenticeship for young children is the Reggio Emilia approach. From a Reggio perspective, the child is “viewed not as a target of instruction, but rather as having the active role as an apprentice . . . learning is not something that is done to the child, but rather something she does” (Hewett, 2001, p. 96). The Reggio Emilia approach to learning also incorporates authenticity by involving young learners in long-term, engrossing programs. The curriculum is characterized by many features of authentic and related learning, including real-life problem solving among peers, with numerous opportunities for creative thinking and exploration. Teachers often work on projects with small groups of children, while the rest of the class engages in a wide variety of self-selected activities typical of preschool classrooms (Malaguzzi, 1998).
**Overcoming Challenges.** Engaging experiences for children involve success in learning through perseverance and overcoming challenges that are attainable. Cognitive psychologist Carol Dweck (2000) claimed that some teachers, by their actions, teach students that they are entitled to a life of easy, low-effort successes and argued that this is a recipe for bitterness, anger, and self-doubt. She explained that these teachers respond to students who are experiencing difficulty by providing easier tasks, which result in the creation of a climate in which challenges are feared rather than addressed. According to MIT professor Alan Kay (1991), “Difficulty should be sought out, as a spur to delving more deeply into an interesting area. An education system that tries to make everything easy and pleasurable will prevent much important learning from happening” (p. 140).

In two separate studies of students in Grades 3 through 7, Connell and his colleagues defined and measured two forms of engagement: *reaction to challenge* and *ongoing engagement* (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 1998). Reaction to challenge refers to students’ coping strategies for dealing with a challenge—particularly whether they engaged or withdrew when faced with a perceived failure in school. Students who perceived a situation as challenging actively persisted in the face of failure, through the use of effort, problem-solving, information-seeking, experimentation, and strategizing. These behaviours tended to be accompanied by an optimistic attitude and attempts to plan and prevent problems from occurring in the future. Conversely, students who perceived that a situation threatened to lead to failure reacted by escaping the situation either mentally or physically and by avoiding the activity for as long as possible (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Ongoing engagement refers to students’ behaviour, emotions, and thought processes over the course of the school day. More specifically, this behavioural engagement includes the amount of time students spend on work, the intensity of their concentration and effort, their tendency to stay on task, and the likelihood to initiate action when given the opportunity to do so. Emotional components of ongoing engagement include heightened levels of positive emotion during the
completion of an activity, demonstrated by enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. Cognitive components of engagement include students’ perceptions of how important it is to be successful in school.

These studies have demonstrated that an individual’s perseverance and ability to overcome challenges are prominent features of engaged learning. Classrooms can be places where achievement through hard work is celebrated and where successful learning experiences contribute to a love of learning for elementary students.

The literature reviewed has demonstrated that when children feel a sense of belonging and are provided occasions for collaboration with their peers, they will be more likely to experience engagement in their learning. The studies have also shown that when elementary students are afforded some ownership over their learning and opportunities for tasks that are both authentic and challenging, their levels of engagement will rise. This literature supports a program of research that provides rich descriptions of engaged learning, in both adult learning and elementary classroom contexts, to enhance our understanding of how and why learners are engaged.

Overall the purpose of this study is to provide an enriched sense of the effects of personal learning on both elementary teachers and their students. More specifically, this chapter focuses on determining the effects of engaged personal learning on teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school, and seeks to discover how elementary school teachers report that their engagement in personal learning plays out in their classrooms.

**Findings**

The data for this chapter were derived from both the online questionnaire and the interview data. A five-point Likert scale was used to determine to what extent participants believed their personal learning experiences impacted their classroom teaching and their students. The results of these responses are shown in Figure 4. More than half of the respondents indicated that their
personal learning impacted their classroom practice a great deal, and over one third responded that it affected it considerably. No participants indicated that their personal learning had a slight impact or none at all. Participants were then asked to explain their response, and the data collected from the 87 responses to that open-form question have been analyzed along with the eleven interview responses to the questions “In what ways do you think your personal learning affects your classroom and your students?” and “Please describe a particular event that happened in your classroom to illustrate the kinds of learning you promote.” Together, these responses provide a comprehensive understanding of how the participants report that their personal learning impacts their classroom teaching and their students.

![Graph showing the extent to which personal learning impacts practice.]

**Figure 4.** How Personal Learning Impacts Practice

Three central themes emerged from the analysis of participant responses to the questionnaire and interview data. These themes—(a) connections, (b) self-as-learner, and (c) vitality—are described in detail below.

**Connections**

Many of the participants reported that they brought their personal learning interests into their classrooms. These wide-ranging interests included health and fitness—dance, yoga, running, and nutrition—as well as handwork—puppetry, knitting, carpentry, and candle making. More varied pursuits incorporated cooking, technology, gardening, face painting, canoeing, and music into
classroom curriculum. The reported results of sharing these interests were twofold. First, the learning activities fostered meaningful connections between the learners and the prescribed curriculum. Second, by sharing their personal interests in the classroom setting, the teachers reported a stronger relationship with their students. As expressed by one participant, “I like to share what I learn with my students and learn together. I think it creates a climate where learning is so much more than what happens in a classroom” (female, NQ, 30s, eastern Ontario). Another participant explained how his handwork and carpentry skills from his personal learning have impacted his teaching:

I’ve always worked with my hands in terms of building stuff, so I’ve integrated that in a major way in the classroom with things like snowshoes, paddles, kayaks, canoes, and then we do year-end trips with what we make, so I have a holistic view of that and it drives the language curriculum often, what we read, sometimes the historical stuff… So it’s a bit of an integration focus but I’m into motivating kids with real-life stuff and in most cases, in most schools it works. (male, FY, 60s, eastern Ontario)

This sentiment was echoed by another participant who noted that the music he does on his own really impacts the programming he is able to do with his students, whether in extracurricular bands or within his classroom. He also explained that when he builds with his class he has a good understanding of forces and can teach his students how to use a saw properly. He attributed this to his personal interests explaining “I have a better knowledge for that than I would’ve eight years ago. So my personal learning does inform the content” (male, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario).

The power of personal and real-life connections to classroom learning was described by another participant who told of how he tries to make his students aware of where they can use their learning and help to connect it to their interests. He explained that he had recently taken a hunting safety course in which he learned that the length of a particular shell is approximately the length of one’s little finger. The following week he and his students were talking about estimating in math
class and he was able to relate the content to what he had learned in his course, “I mentioned the hunting course and the shell sizes and made a personal connection with a few students” (male, FY, 50s, central Ontario).

This example illustrates how teachers’ personal learning experiences can promote relationships between individuals as well as to curriculum content. Such an impact was also confirmed by a participant who brings his passions of music, the outdoors, cooking, poetry, and art-making into his classroom. He expressed that the students “feel my passion for many different activities and this passion and energy helps engage my students. I think the key is that my students experience me being authentic in my interests and in what I am sharing with them” (male, RC, 40s, eastern Ontario).

The formation of strong relationships was described as the greatest impact by another participant. She explained how she shares her personal learning experiences with her intermediate students:

I think I’m able to use my learning experiences to guide my kids. I talk about my life a lot. I feel like they know me very intimately, like their mentor. I use my experience all the time in the classroom. I talk about my trips, what I’ve learned, what I did this weekend and my frustrations so I definitely bring that into the class. If not to actually use as an example, then just for them to hear that human beings experience difficulty and persevere and I’d like to kind of model my experiences. I talk about bad things that have happened and how I’ve worked through them and hopefully in a way to show them that these things do happen in life and this is what I did to overcome it or this is what I did that’s interesting and exciting and maybe give them just a perspective on life that they may not have had before, maybe give them some ideas of what they could do to solve their problems or what they could do for fun. (female, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

This kind of sharing and connectedness relates closely to the next theme of self as learner.
Self as Learner

Self as learner is an encompassing theme that was woven throughout many of the descriptions given by participants. Many spoke of how their participation in personal learning pursuits reminded them of what it is like to be a learner, in terms of varying learning styles and needs, frustrations experienced when learning doesn’t come easily, and risk-taking involved in making mistakes.

Sharing challenges he faced in trying to learn Spanish, one participant explained that he is reminded that there are certain things he learns with ease and speed and that he is more comfortable learning and demonstrating with others. He told how this experience makes him more sensitive to his students and more aware of the fact that there are ways that they learn better than others. Along the same lines, another described how she has found through her personal learning experiences that “I tend to see that my learning needs are really not that much different than my students’ needs. I have to consider their readiness level, interest, motivation, engagement and preferred learning style” (female, RC, 50s, eastern Ontario). The teachers’ participation in personal learning pursuits has also impacted the way they structure their classroom learning and the kinds of learning opportunities they provide for their students. One participant explained:

As I encounter myself as someone learning, I think about how my students feel in learning situations and what will make them engage with content. If they are given the option to design and select assignments, they tend to “own” them more and be more passionate about their outcome. If students can become emotionally invested in their pursuits as learners, they ultimately become more independent learners, or in the case of school, co-teachers. (male, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

The frustrations and struggles that the participants experienced during their personal learning endeavours were also reported to impact their classroom practice and the ways in which the teachers could relate to their students. One participant shared her insight into facing obstacles: “It’s
interesting to encounter yourself through your weaknesses, you realize oh, everybody doesn’t struggle with this, this seems to come so naturally to other people… it tells me more about who I am—at the moment” (female, EWP, 30s, central Ontario). The notion of “at the moment” and the acknowledgement that everyone can learn and improve is a powerful one. As another participant described his pride in his accomplishments in fencing, he noted that this satisfaction is a result of overcoming challenges. “I had to go through a lot of frustration and work harder to get where I am in fencing” (male, NQ, 20s, eastern Ontario). He reported that, in this way, he has learned that perseverance is an integral part of success, and this is something he is reminded of when some of his students achieve success with minimal effort.

Experiencing frustration as a learner can also help teachers empathize with their students. For one teacher, taking up the sport of golf was a struggle. She explained that sports usually come naturally to her and that when golf was difficult it was extremely frustrating. She continued on, telling how when she thought about how easily frustrated she became when she missed the ball or took a bad shot, she could relate to her students who were experiencing difficulties in their learning. “I think of the strategies I use to calm myself down and use them with the kids to help them calm down, say ok, and make a plan. I completely empathize with those kids” (female, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario).

Personal learning opportunities also provided participants with the occasion to take risks and to try something new. This experience was reported to have impacted classroom practice when teachers shared their experiences and encouraged their students to try something new and to take risks. One participant shared, “I recall certain events in which I felt embarrassed or afraid to try something new, and I make sure that I explain this to my students. We talk about being brave and trying new things and I don’t single students out” (female, NQ, 20s, central Ontario). Another
explained how his new learning really reminds him of what the process might be like for his students:

By trying new things you’re learning how to learn. Just figuring out how to manage weaknesses and learn again. And with kids right, I mean in your classroom if you can get them to realize what they do know and what they don’t know . . . and just simply address that, not sweat about it or freak out or feel bad, but just, oh ok, how do I learn about it and move forward. And then the teacher to get that emotional aspect out of it, and just see that role and that discovery and help the student to just identify it and then to address it as an opportunity or as an adventure. Like, there’s the road not travelled...let’s figure it out. (male, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

Vitality

From their personal learning experiences, nearly all participants reported that they gained energy, enthusiasm, and joy as an individual and that this had a positive effect on the atmosphere in their classroom. Many participants believe that their personal learning affects the way that they approach their day. “When I am feeling inspired I find I will teach more creatively and be more motivated. I also find my energy level much higher when I have been stimulated by personal learning experiences” (female, NQ, 20s, GTA). This sentiment was echoed by another who explained that personal learning has had a tremendous impact on how he feels about himself as a person and his place in the community. “I feel more capable and more myself, more invested in my own life, and therefore ready to come to the ‘negotiating table’ of teaching with a more positive and engaged attitude” (male, NQ, 20s, eastern Ontario). Others described how their personal learning was a model for the kinds of lifelong learning they hope to promote for their students. One teacher observed that if teachers are excited about their own personal learning and how many things there are still out there for them to learn, they will then pass that enthusiasm on to their students. She continued, noting that students need to see that their teachers are always learning new things and
growing as people so that they realize that education is lifelong and not simply for the duration of formal schooling (female, NQ, 20s, southern Ontario).

This sentiment was echoed by another, who explained that his personal learning simply makes him a happier person, and that if he has time to do what he wants to do outside of teaching, he is more satisfied when he comes to work. He continued on, saying

I have to be true to myself outside of class. Especially with art, it would be the number one thing because I really try to pursue it, not only because I like to do it but because I kind of feel like if I’m not doing it I’m letting myself down. It’s very important to do those things where I feel like I’m fulfilling my purpose. And so, if I’m setting an example for my students I need to be doing it myself. If I’m encouraging them to be artistic or to structure their own time wisely and have balanced lives then I want to do it too. (male, NQ, 20s, eastern Ontario)

Discussion

The elementary teachers who participated in this study engaged in personal learning to bring balance, energy, enjoyment, and fulfillment to their lives. They continued to learn out of interest, utilitarian need, and a passion for learning, and although they do this for themselves, the findings demonstrate that their personal learning almost always connects back to their teaching. The reported impact of engaged personal learning for these teachers illustrates the ways that vitality, a sense of connectedness, and a desire to learn better equips them to provide their students with a caring environment and authentic challenge and also to bring wonder, adventure, relatedness, and joy to their teaching.

The relational quality that the participants described between the interests and needs of their students and the meaningful and relevant learning experiences that they provide reveals an effective way that teachers can foster engaged learning in their students. The strength of the relationships, and the depth of the caring that was reported between the teachers and their students, suggests that
meaningful relationships can be fostered when teachers are able to relate to their students as learners.

In continuing to learn for themselves, the teachers reported that they are challenged and engaged in meaningful ways outside of their profession. This experience helps them to not only empathize with their students and with the challenges and risks that they take, but also reminds them to offer and encourage learning opportunities that are rich, varied, and meaningful. Ongoing personal learning is vital for the participants. Their engagement in rich and fulfilling learning not only helps them to make connections and model learning for their students, it also rejuvenates and strengthens them. The participants reported that they come to school with more energy and enthusiasm for the learning.

The findings align closely with the work of Intrator and Kunzman (2006), who implore that teachers should engage in activities that cultivate their capacity to teach with greater consciousness, self-awareness, and integrity—learning opportunities that nourish their inner life, their souls. Although they report on an emerging form of professional development programming, their recommendation is similar: Teachers need “sustained opportunities to renew connections between their personal selves and their work, to ensure that their labors are an authentic outgrowth of who they are as people and what calls them to the profession of teaching” (p. 27). The participants in the present study report that they create revitalizing and challenging opportunities for themselves in their personal learning endeavours. In the next chapter, I introduce the three participants who took part in classroom observation sessions to determine the extent to which the reported effects of engaged personal learning are enacted in the classroom with their elementary students.
Chapter 6
Engaged Classroom Learning

The third of these related chapters describes how the rich personal learning of three elementary teachers impacts their classroom teaching and their students’ engagement. Using data collected from the questionnaires, many direct quotations from the interview transcripts, and notes from the observation sessions, this chapter offers a comprehensive description of how each participant has experienced the phenomenon of personal learning throughout their teaching careers and in what ways they perceive that their personal learning affects their classroom practice. The observational data illustrates the extent to which the reported impact is enacted in the classrooms, with the students. All names have been changed for the sake of confidentiality.

Darren, Ursula, and Rachel are elementary teachers and lifelong learners. Darren is a male in his sixties who teaches in the junior division in a small rural school in Ontario. A celebrated teacher with more than 25 years of classroom experience in both Alberta and Ontario, he is married and has two adult children and five grandchildren. Born into a large family with strong tradition and faith, his mother was a music teacher and his father a businessman. Darren has an honours undergraduate degree in commerce, a Master’s degree in Education, and additional graduate courses in theology. Darren is qualified to teach in three divisions and has attained additional teaching qualifications in technological and outdoor education.

Ursula is a female in her thirties who teaches in the intermediate division in rural Ontario. With more than 10 years of classroom experience in both urban and rural communities, she lives with her partner in a home that they are restoring from its abandoned state. Raised in central Ontario in a family who valued the outdoors, Ursula has an undergraduate degree in Environmental
Studies and Geography, a Bachelor of Education in Primary and Junior, as well as a diploma in Ecotourism Management.

Rachel is a female in her forties who teaches Kindergarten in an urban centre in Ontario. With more than 16 years of classroom experience, she is married and has two school-aged children. Rachel has an education degree with a focus in outdoor and experiential education, and additional qualifications in early childhood and healing education, and remedial training. Rachel is qualified to teach in the primary and junior divisions and has attained additional teaching qualifications in English as a second language.

Darren has learned formally, non-formally, and informally all his life. He has always enjoyed working with his hands and, at the time of our interview, he had just completed a 40-pound wooden canoe, with paddles carefully crafted to match the design. An avid reader, he has read extensively in theology, post and beam construction, and anything else that catches his interest. During his studies to become a teacher, Darren took a course in building log homes and then worked with his instructor during Christmas break and during the summer months afterwards. Through this apprenticeship and his considerable reading, he gained the skills required to build a log cabin in a remote area of western Canada. Together with his son, he designed and built the cabin. He worked mainly alone for two summers, learning by reading technical literature as he went along and collaborating with his son by satellite phone. He laughed modestly at my reaction to the photograph of the cabin. “You built this!?” I exclaimed, to which he replied,

I’m a reader, yeah, most of what I build I’ve had to read and then build it in my head. Not everybody would do that, but I devoured it . . . and my son, he’s got an engineering degree so we were able to look at weights and we designed the hoist and wood and took it apart to lift the logs and all the complications of that. You know, it was a challenge to do that, but fun.
With a very long list of informal personal learning endeavours, Ursula’s most significant personal learning has come in the form of carpentry and home renovations, which she began after she and her partner bought an abandoned home eight years ago. She explained that in the beginning, the house didn’t even have windows:

It was the house that the families around us said “Oh you live in the house where the raccoons used to live”. It was a little run down, it’s still a little run down, but you know, it’s a lot of fun.

She explained that when they first moved in to the house, aside from teaching, the renovations were all that she did. All of her informal learning was “house, house, house—tearing stuff down, new roof, new windows, everything.”

Ursula continued on, recounting that although renovating their home has been a lot of work, it has been a really positive experience for her and her partner, and that this is due, in part, to their relationship. She described him as being a “really good teacher” who broke the learning down into manageable tasks. Each evening they would talk about Ursula’s goal for the next day and then he would demonstrate what she needed to do. During the day, she would work independently but could call him to ask questions or to let him know the supplies needed for the next day. “Everything was one tiny little step at a time as opposed to me being overwhelmed, so I learned a lot and I really enjoyed it too.”

Canoe trips have also played an important role in Ursula’s life since she began her teaching career. Every summer, for at least two weeks, she and her partner travel to northern Ontario or Quebec. She described how much they’ve learned as the years have passed. “When I look at the way we used to camp and the way we camp now, we’re so much better at it now.” Canoeing is a significant part of Ursula’s life as she explained, “I’m truly myself in a canoe. There’s nowhere I’m more comfortable with me than when I have nothing except what’s in our boat.” This sense of
belonging and comfort has been developed in her adult life, as she didn’t learn to canoe until after university.

A multi-instrumentalist, Ursula began playing music at the age of five and has been in many bands. At the time of data collection, she was creating and recording tracks in her home. She described both the challenges and the joys of working together to create music:

When you’re in bands, music is so communal it can be a real challenge. I remember biting my tongue a lot, you know? I think that’s just the reality of working on shared art because art is such an expression of yourself and you have to try and make that work with other people, so... music, the creation, writing music, brings me great joy. Mixing, working out the wrinkles, does not bring me as much joy.

Her informal learning endeavours go on and on and include cooking, gardening, participating in book clubs, travel, and fitness including training to run half marathons, competing in orienteering, and learning to ski.

Rachel’s personal learning has occurred in formal, non-formal, and informal settings throughout the past 16 years. She described how, for her, professional learning is simultaneously personal and something that she looks forward to taking part in. She really enjoys her professional learning and finds that it fulfills her on a personal level. She described the impact of her formal summer learning activities:

You know, at the end of the year your glass is empty and you need more than just the holiday to fill it back up again because you need to come back with something new. I go because I want to go and because I know when I come back I’ll have so much more. I’m also a better person at home, I feel, because I’ve had time away and I’m filling my cup but I’m not filling it at anyone else’s expense.

In non-formal settings, she has joined classes in Cuban dancing and yoga, and has been a member of a community choir for the past eight years. Of all of her personal learning endeavours, Rachel enjoys singing in the choir most. She explained, “I think there’s something that happens to
us when we’re involved in music in terms of the brain and the heart.” Rachel really enjoys singing with other people and has met many new friends through singing.

Informally, Rachel has enjoyed learning to cook with her family and to bake different kinds of bread. She has taken part in gardening, knitting, and sewing in informal ways—often sharing these new skills with her children.

Darren explained that his interests in outdoor, experiential and technological education have had a tremendous impact on his teaching. He strives to integrate outdoor and experiential elements into his teaching with projects such as building snowshoes, walking sticks, paddles, kayaks, and canoes. He then plans culminating trips that allow the students to really experience what they have built in a natural setting. He described one instance when he and his students paddled the Rideau Canal in their boats on a multiday trip:

We’d spent a week on the water with four 20-foot dories, sixteen kids. The superintendent came the last morning; she came out with our principal and rowed with us. We were lucky because it was flat out around the LaSalle causeway and when we rounded the corner out there and saw the Fort . . . the accomplishment that those kids felt. Years later I know what they’ve studied, where they’ve gone for post-secondary or if they’ve stayed at home, whether they’re married or not. That experience, that whole year of doing that together had a major impact.

Darren bridges his life and personal interests with his teaching, and works hard to bring the same opportunity to his young students as well. He explained that especially at his current site, a small rural school, he is able to personalize the curriculum and the learning that happens with his students. He spoke of a student in Grade 6; he was a hunter’s eldest son and spent much time with his father shooting ducks and geese. The boy was totally fascinated by shells and very carefully took them apart and investigated them for a school project. “We’re able to do stuff like that here, the learning is fairly personalized.” Ursula reported that her personal learning endeavours affect her teaching and her students a great deal. More than anything, she explained that her involvement in
personal learning makes her happy, and so she’s able to come to her work happy. She also considers her experiences as beneficial for her classroom practice, as she is able to use her own experiences to guide her students. Ursula described how she shares some of the difficulties she has faced and how she has worked through them in the hopes that she can show her students that she herself has overcome challenges. She also spoke of sharing interesting and exciting events in her life, in order to offer her students a perspective on life that they may not have had before, or to give them some ideas of what they could do to solve their problems, or what they could do for fun.

In terms of extracurricular involvement at the school, Ursula coaches volleyball, soccer, ultimate Frisbee, high jump, and shot put. She also runs a music program two days a week after school, from January to June. Through school board grants and other funding, she has acquired two drum sets, two basses, five guitars and amps, microphones, and a keyboard; each year she guides two groups of students as they form a band and learn to play their instruments with the goal of playing an annual, year-end show for the community.

Rachel was very emphatic in describing the impact of her learning on her classroom and her students:

Fully, they fully impact . . . I think partly because they’re forming who I am so if I think about dancing, I’m doing dance because I wanted something that was physical but something that just gave me pure joy, you know, I’m so happy about doing dance. Yoga, it’s what my body needs. As an early childhood teacher I have to contort myself into all sorts of positions. I have to sit in a little chair and get my legs under little tables, my body needs to be able to move and I have to remember to keep my shoulders down. You know, it totally impacts. As an early childhood teacher, you’re constantly bleeding out your energy, right? And children just take them, for the first seven years they really draw on the adult’s energy around them. And so we are giving, every day we are emptying of our life forces and so what I need are things that help me replenish those life forces. And eating well, sleeping well, dancing, singing, whatever. Even though I’m out until 9 for choir tonight and I don’t get to bed until late, it’s totally feeding my etheric. When I dance, I’m totally feeding my etheric. When I go to conferences and I meet people you know, and I see colleagues I haven’t seen before and we play and sing together or we just sit and chat and share, it’s all contributing to building myself up.
as a human being and as a teacher and as a parent. So that I can go back into that space and really be in shape to be there.

Rachel also commented on how the skills she develops through her personal learning endeavors relate in more direct ways to her teaching. She brings new music to her students throughout the year; she bakes bread with the children each week, and she shares her knowledge of gardening and handwork at different times of the year.

After completing online questionnaires and participating in individual interviews, each of these teachers invited me into their classroom, to see first-hand the ways in which their personal learning impacted their in-school practices and their students’ engagement. These classroom observations lasted between 5 and 10 hours and provided me with opportunities to gather further insights into the learning activities employed by teachers, as well as to gain a more visceral sense of the classroom. I used observational scales to document features of engaged learning, and field notes, audio-recordings, and photographs to document the characteristics of the learning and the classroom community. Further details appear in the methods chapter.

All three participants exemplify lifelong learning. They learn in any situation and easily transfer ideas between their personal and professional lives. Darren represents a learner who has had a relatively focused trajectory of learning throughout his lifetime. His enthusiasm for building and the outdoors has sustained him for decades, and he continues to learn and try new methods with each project. Ursula illustrates the importance of informal learning; she is constantly learning informally in relation to her leisure activities. She is a unique participant, because she has always been heavily involved in personal learning—even at the beginning of her career. In fact, she told me that when she first began teaching, she was so engaged in her own music-making that her free time was not spent on professional learning at all. Rachel’s learning offers an example of an individual for whom personal and professional learning seems to be almost completely integrated. Although the
learning opportunities and contexts that each of the participants has experienced are varied, they all believe that their personal learning impacts their classroom practice in profound ways.

Shulman (1997, 2004) wrote of principles for effective and enduring learning—for both students and for their adult teachers. These include (a) meaningful activity, (b) collaboration with others, (c) passion and commitment, and (d) supportive and nurturing community. These principles relate to the personal learning experiences of Darren, Ursula, and Rachel and also speak to the ways in which their learning plays out for their students. In this section, I use Shulman’s work to frame the impact of teacher personal learning on both the teachers themselves and their students.

**Meaningful Activity**

Children and adults alike want to feel they are free to participate in activities that are relevant to them, to feel autonomous and not perpetually and relentlessly directed to do what authorities have decided in advance (Sharan & Sharan, 1992). According to Shulman (1997), engaged learning entails content that is generative, essential, and pivotal to both the subject and the learner; it can yield new understandings and serve as the basis for future learning (p. 16). Meaningful opportunities also involve learners as active agents in the learning process. Learning in this way becomes more active through experimentation and inquiry, as well as through writing, dialogue, and questioning. In the tech room, one of Darren’s students was about to turn on the band saw when she exclaimed, “I couldn’t even use a pencil sharpener at my old school and now I get to use a band saw!” The independence and ownership that these young students experience is remarkable. Another student told me that his favourite thing about school was woodworking and his favourite project of the year was making a cutting board because he “did a pretty good job.” He continued:
I did the whole thing, like the plan and all the cutting and everything. I used a skill saw, clamps and a jigsaw. I was a bit scared when I used the belt sander. I wanted to make a heart but it ended up looking like a raindrop. I gave it to my mom. She loved it.

Figure 5. Grade 4 and 5 students using a band saw in Darren’s class.
Meaningful learning abounds in Rachel’s classroom. After snack, the children clear their dishes and the children are responsible for wiping the table and helping load the dishes up in the kitchen. During one of the observation sessions, two of the younger boys in the class went into the mini kitchen and they started throwing all of the dishes into the sink and making a huge noise. Rachel went into the real kitchen, got a bin and filled it with soapy water. She then got another bin and filled it with warm water, put out a towel and invited the two boys to come over. The first boy

Figure 6. Rachel serving lunch.
washed all the pots and the second boy rinsed them, and then, after the pots were done the two
boys switched places and washed all of the bowls. The boys continued with their task and dried all
of the dishes and put them away, then returned to their play with less boisterous energy. The boys
had taken part in meaningful work that had to happen in the class and, at the same time, were
supported by Rachel in their transition back to free play.

When I visited Ursula’s class, her intermediate students were finishing up a unit on reasoned
judgments and debating. In a culminating activity, the class was debating topics that were of
personal interest to them, in front of other students in the school. Topics included whether violent
video games make kids more violent and whether McDonalds should ban happy meal toys to battle
childhood obesity. Ursula has found that her students have really grown, both academically and
personally, by learning about how to make informed decisions. This kind of learning is not only
meaningful to the students, but it is relevant to their lives outside of the classroom.

Collaboration With Others

Shulman (1997) explained that collaboration is not exclusively cooperation in a particular
form of social interaction. Rather, collaboration involves learners working together in ways that
scaffold and support each other’s learning, and in ways that supplement each other’s knowledge.
Moreover, there are intellectual challenges that are nearly impossible to accomplish alone, and are
more readily addressed in the company of others (p. 17). This kind of collaboration was described by
many of Darren’s students. A male student in Grade 7 who was involved in building the boats
explained:

I think this whole class is about teamwork, we’re all trying to work
together and I think we’re doing a great job so far. We kind of switch
roles, we switch it up every week and we have different groups every
month and so we learn from each other.
This sentiment was shared by a younger female student in Grade 5 who was new to the school. She told me that she was very nervous when she first began learning in the tech room.

I thought I was going to make a mistake with the band saw. When I cut it out I was very scared, because all of the other girls in Grade 5 knew how to do it, but then they helped me and I felt better.

For young learners, the social nature of many learning activities encourages engagement in learning (Helme & Clarke, 2001; Sharan & Tan, 2008). In Rachel’s classroom, the young children are provided with ample time and space to choose activities. During indoor free play, three boys decided to build a house. Together they lifted and carried planks, collected blankets, and positioned them

Figure 7. Building a house in Rachel’s class.
over the wooden structure. They worked together for more than 20 minutes until they had created a house that all three boys were satisfied with. I noticed that the boys engaged in a lot of negotiating and problem-solving and that Rachel did not mediate or try to resolve issues unless she felt it was absolutely necessary.

**Passion and Commitment**

Shulman (1997) writes that both the learners and their teachers should share a passion for the material that is being learned. When learners of any age are emotionally committed to the ideas, processes and activities, and see the work as connected to present and future goals, they are more likely to be engaged in their learning. Ursula’s passion for music-making is certainly shared with her students.

*Figure 8. Rehearsal for Ursula’s students.*
students in the extracurricular band program. Their involvement in music-making enhances their ability to work together, and their commitment to the process is so strong that Ursula is often a spectator at rehearsals. As I observed a rehearsal, I was keenly aware of the confidence and focus that the students displayed. There were moments of struggle, when certain members had difficulty playing a chord progression or sustaining a long note, or when they were unable to keep time together. In each instance, the group worked together to improve. Working towards an upcoming concert for the community, their learning was very authentic. This authenticity increased commitment to the process and perseverance through the challenges. Ultimately, the students expressed immense pride in creating music that required commitment to the process and attention to the skills.

For young learners, passion and commitment is related to overcoming challenges. A female student in Darren’s class described the challenge of work that requires precision and accuracy:

The hardest project was the picture frame for me, because we had to do a whole lot of measuring and careful cutting. The hardest part is getting the cut just right. It takes a lot of concentration and careful planning. Just like when I made my chairlift for the pulley project, that took some really careful measuring and cutting too. I had to get the string just right so that it would go around and hold the chairlift up and not let it sag down too much . . . the tension had to be just right.
Supportive and Nurturing Community

Meaningful activity, collaboration, and passion for learning are supported, legitimized, and nurtured within a community or culture that values such experiences and creates many opportunities for them to occur and to be accomplished with success and pleasure. Shulman (1997) noted that supportive and nurturing learning communities that are characterized by activity, reflection, and collaboration are inherently uncertain, complex, and demanding. This kind of rich and meaningful learning entails high levels of risk and unpredictability for the learners, and so requires a culture that supports, scaffolds, and rewards those levels of risk-taking, understanding, and commitment.
Ursula instills a culture of respect and openness, and a very strong sense of community, within her intermediate classroom. Every morning, the day begins with a time for sharing. During the interview, she explained:

We talk a lot. A lot, a lot, a lot, we talk. They have become incredible sharers and very emotionally supportive of one another and I would like to say that I can take credit for that because they were not like that when they came into my room in September. We talk about everything. We take school issues head on. So in the morning if there’s something to talk about, so and so got bullied on the bus or there was an issue on the yard or so and so got in a fight with their mother, they share. It’s like everything’s out there, “my brother went into rehab, he decided to go into rehab” and the kids are like “right
on, way to go.” There’s no shame in anything. They talk about problems and life and so we share every morning.

As I sat at the back of the room, I was struck by the honesty and candour that these adolescents had when they spoke of the issues that were important to them. Students talked about family illnesses and death, their successes with community athletics, and one talked about how he was feeling on his first day back at school after a suspension.

Figure 11. Rebecca and her students watching an impromptu puppet show.

This same kind of openness was also felt in Darren’s classroom. He very candidly shares his ideas, his questions, and his weaknesses with the students. During an integrated language and social studies period, he uttered, “I haven’t done this in quite a while, and so I need to think this through for a moment before we continue.” I noticed that Darren spoke in a quiet and calm manner with his
students and they were quick to tell me that he was a very kind and helpful teacher. Rachel also has a gentle approach with her students. As she welcomed the students in the morning, I noticed that she brought herself down to their height and smiled at each child as she expressed how happy she was to see them. She quietly sings as a gesture for the students to join her and transition to new activities. Overall, this classroom is a very happy and lively environment for learning.

**Discussion**

The findings reported in this chapter are a culmination of the results described in the previous two chapters. The features of engaged learning outlined in Chapter 4 provided the framework to understand the reported impact described in Chapter 5. It was only after recognizing the reported impact that I could select the three participants to observe, as it gave me an idea of what I was looking for.

When creating the research design for this study, I chose to conduct classroom observations, in part, to observe the extent to which the reported impact of the teacher’s engaged personal learning was enacted in the classroom. A significant result of these observation sessions is that, in all three cases, the descriptions reported in both the questionnaire and interview data were accurate. Not only do these observation sessions illustrate engaged learning, they also strengthen and validate the findings reported in Chapters 4 and 5.

I feel compelled to note that, throughout all of the stages of data collection, these teachers did not realize that their classrooms are the exceptions and not the norm. I’ve visited hundreds of classrooms in both my role as a classroom teacher and as a teacher educator who supervises pre-service teachers during their practica. The three classrooms I observed in were welcoming, safe, and happy, and the humility and modesty that the teachers conveyed in my time with them were remarkable.
Whitehead (1929) suggested that the process of learning can be an adventure to the child who with “all his [sic] senses want to know and his burgeoning mind wants to know” (cited in Ward, 1970, p. 495) He lamented that, for adults, the novelty of learning as an adventure begins to wear off. Therefore, if an adult truly is to be a teacher, he or she must relive things as a child, and be a discoverer of novelty. In this sense, the teacher becomes young once more. Darren, Ursula, and Rachel, along with many of the other participants in this study, are teachers who continue to learn along with their students. The passion for learning reaches far beyond the formal curriculum. They each strive to help their students to be effective learners and engaged citizens and work to help their students make connections between the learning that happens at school and who they are and who they will become beyond their time in their classrooms. Their passion for learning is evident in the many ways that they provide meaningful, collaborative, and challenging opportunities, in a very supportive and nurturing environment, for their students.
Chapter 7

Learning to Watch, Wait, and Wonder: Parenthood and Teaching

When I set out to begin this research study, one of my research questions was to discover the underlying purposes and motivations that elementary teachers assign to their personal learning experiences. Through the data collection and analysis, it became clear that some of the most profound learning experiences were not preplanned or intentional in nature, but arose as a result of life. In some cases, the participants did not consider these experiences to be learning until, during the interviews, they began to detail the effects that these experiences had on them both as individuals and as educators.

The most profound example of this emerged as some of the participants described what and how they had learned through parenting. As parenting was not something I set out to explore, I did not probe for these words, nor did I specifically ask questions about parenting. It is possible this learning presented itself so clearly to me because I have been deeply entrenched in becoming and being a mom throughout my research and writing. Since beginning my doctoral work, I have welcomed two beautiful children into the world, and have discovered first-hand the joys and the complexities of being a mother.

In this chapter, I explore the learning that eight of the questionnaire participants and four of the interview participants described, framed by the verbs watch, wait, and wonder. In many of the parenting texts that I have referred to in the past two years (Dancy, 2000; Hogg, 2001), the authors recommend taking time to carefully observe what your child is doing, interpret what the child is communicating or identify what your child needs, and then reflect on and seek out the best ways to interact with and nurture each child. It is important to note that my initial intent was to conduct the study without bringing in my own story. If I had chosen to maintain this stance, this chapter would
not have been included in the dissertation. It is also imperative to emphasize that although the participants who spoke and wrote about parenting were female, the findings from this study do not suggest that motherhood offers personal learning advantages while fatherhood does not. Nor does it suggest that successful teaching is dependent on parenthood.

**Learning to Watch**

*Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?*  
Henry David Thoreau

To watch is to observe and to look attentively. In describing the ways that they have learned through parenthood, many of the participants spoke of watching their children and of understanding their cues and developing insight into their needs. Learning the bodily cues of infants such as *rooting* or bringing their knees to their chest to show gas pain are simple skills that have tremendous impact on a parent’s ability to calm and care for his or her child. Parents observe their children all of the time and not only with their eyes. They also use their bodies to monitor the wellbeing of their children; in fact, this begins in the womb. When an expectant mother rubs her belly, talks, sings, dances, or walks, she is communicating with her baby through the senses. Similarly, her unborn child can communicate through kicking and moving. For example, when the baby hears music she likes, she may kick energetically yet gently. As Verny and Weintraub (2005) suggest, mothers and unborn children are able to communicate in an intuitive way, whereby the mother’s thoughts, intentions, and much of her emotions are transmitted intuitively to her baby. They also note that the mother receives messages in the same way from her unborn child, often in the form of dreams. One mother spoke of how much she learned about her own body and the physical and emotional changes that were taking place. She explained, “From the moment I discovered I was expecting, the learning curve has been so high.”
Embodied knowing refers to experiences that engage the body, senses, emotions, and imagination, as well as the intellect (Bresler, 2004; Powell, 2007). In his work on tacit knowing, Polanyi (1969) contends that knowledge begins in the body: “Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts” (pp. 147–148). Whether nursing or feeding a baby or rocking a child to sleep, using the body and being conscious of the body as a vehicle and source of knowledge is central to many parenting activities.

Many scholars have lamented the lack of the body in formal education settings (Bresler, 2004; Dewey, 1938; Latta, 2001; Stinson, 1995), urging educators to infuse meaning into their teaching through the exchange of movements within the body and the environment. Experiential and inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning encourage children to experience their bodies as a medium for sense making. The arts are natural instruments for embodied knowledge and offer a powerful means for children to see the body as a medium for sense making (Bresler, 2004). The embodied experiences of dance, drama, musical theatre, and visual arts entail educating the child, not only from the “neck up” (Powell, 2004, p. 193) but also through the whole body, through the simultaneous incorporation of thinking, feeling, seeing, acting, knowing, and creating. Embodiment offers a compelling way to rethink how children learn, teachers teach, and schools are organized, and how mothers, as teachers, have first-hand knowledge of the power of such experiences.

Watching can also mean to guard or protect. Many of the parents described the learning they had experienced through protecting and watching over their children. In particular, one participant explained that she has been very engaged in learning informally about chemicals in her living environment and about how to avoid raising children with chronic illnesses like asthma and allergies. In addition to her work as a teacher, she has also started a small business selling chemical-free cleaning products, prompted by her learning in this area. Another participant described how having
two children with special needs has involved extensive learning both for her own children and her students. She wrote:

I have two children with special needs—one who is gifted, has ADHD and has Asperger’s, and another who has dyslexia and has social anxiety disorder with possible/probable depression. I actively seek out additional ways to expand my knowledge and understanding within the field of special education. (female, NQ, 30s, GTA)

Both participants are vigilant and on the lookout for learning opportunities that will support them as they protect and encourage the healthy development of their children. Boger (n.d.) suggests that, from the outside, the act of watching and watching over might look very similar, however they are very different. She explains that the most obvious difference lies in the intention of the observer. When a teacher or parent watches over children, they do so out of concern to keep them safe from harm. One participant stated:

I have also realized each child is someone’s little baby. Each child comes with his or her own background and baggage and as much as we wish all of that away so we can get on with teaching, it doesn’t go away. Primary educators are the front line for kids. We have to be there to support them and make them feel good about themselves. (female, EWP, 40s, eastern Ontario)

What we see is often determined by our own view of life. This perspective is often personal and, in the case of mothers as teacher, the lens through which observations are made may bring about a more protective and caring interpretation. As Claesson and Brice (1989) noted, “Teacher-mothers are responsible for the growth and development of small children during most of their waking hours. Their dual role . . . provides unique opportunities for positive transfer of learning and experience between the professional and private lives of these women” (p. 1). van Manen (1979) writes of three different kinds of pedagogic observing:

When I as passer-by stop to watch some children play—let’s say, boys playing soccer—then my watching could be called “observing.” I stand and watch for ten minutes at a soccer field that belongs to an
inner-city school. If I know soccer, then I have seen quite a bit in 10 minutes’ time. Subsequently, I continue my interrupted walk. For the children I am an outsider, a passer-by who stopped to watch and then left. Whatever I have “seen” is a reflection of this. When I am not an outsider/passer-by, but someone who belongs in the life of the children—a father who participates in the game, or a coach of the soccer club—then I observe the game in a very different manner. There is a relationship between myself and the children whom I observe. They know me and I know them. When I watch their game this, too, is observing. My vantage point is now different. I observe from out-of-their-midst. I am not an outsider but an insider in the life of the children. There is a third form of “observing.” I pass by the schoolyard; I could be the school psychologist, a counsellor, or maybe a home-room teacher who has special responsibilities for these children. The children know me and I know them. When I stand still and watch while they are playing, I am an outsider in a certain sense, since now I observe them from a scientific or an educational vantage point of “pedagogue” or “diagnosticus.” But I am also involved, since I am and feel that I am responsible for their education. I stand beside a parent—on the side of the educators. Now I observe in a special manner, however. I have learned to adopt a scientific vantage point and my observing is observation from that “vision.” (p. 8)

The kind of watching or observing that a parent-teacher engages in with his or her elementary students is a combination of van Manen’s second and third forms of observing. The teacher is watching not only as an educator, but as a caregiver as well.

Watching can also mean to tend, to care for and look after. In describing how she has learned to care for her children, one participant explained that she read books and asked for advice. But her real learning about caring for her children happened from the actual experience of caring for the children—checking their temperature throughout the night, giving tepid baths to bring down a fever, and trying to figure out which rashes required a visit to the doctor. Experiential learning emphasizes doing the task in order to learn it. The learner may receive prior instruction before performing the task, but then does the task on his or her own (Kolb, 1984). The learning that this mother engaged in is real experiential learning—the learning is in the doing or the experience. Another detailed the experiential nature of her learning as she has tried to make the world the best
place possible for her children. She wrote, “You learn about proper feeding and nutrition, when to introduce new foods, what to do when they are sick, when to be concerned about their health and when to deal with illnesses on your own” (female, FY, 50s, central Ontario). She continued on, explaining that as a parent, you do a lot of hands on learning, you read books and ask your parents for advice. You learn to watch for milestones in your children’s growth and development and how to stimulate them by offering them books and toys, by talking to them, and by giving them experiences appropriate to their age, whether chronological or cognitive.

Trotman (1984) wrote, “What made women so apparently suited to teaching was their warmth, responsiveness, and emotional attachment to mothering” (p. 140). This was echoed by a participant who explained that the lessons learned as a mother are parallel to those learned as a teacher, “but on a more personal and intense level” (female, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario). In her work, Starting at home: Caring and social policy, Nel Noddings (2002) suggests that “women, looking at their own universe, might point to motherhood . . . as a school universally accessible and one that teaches very different lessons—lessons of tenderness, empowerment, and constancy” (p. 108). This was reaffirmed by a participant:

Kids need to believe they are good people and have a lot to offer the world. We do that with our own children each day and we try with those at school but often the little ones with the most difficulties miss out or are not given enough support. We need to make happy, healthy kids our priority and then let’s work on academics. (female, EWP, 40s, eastern Ontario)

The participants have described how, in observing, protecting, and caring for their own children, they have learned to observe, protect, and care for their young students in a similar way.

**Learning to Wait**

*Patience is power. Patience is not an absence of action; rather it is “timing”; it waits on the right time to act, for the right principles and in the right way.*

Fulton J. Sheen
Patience, he thought. So much of this was patience—waiting, and thinking and doing things right. So much of all this, so much of all living was patience and thinking.

Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*

Waiting means to stay or remain, to pause for another to catch up, and to rest in patience.

The role of parent never stops, and many of the participants explained that this realization has taken time to adjust to. One participant noted:

Being a mom is the most important learning experience there is, in my opinion. As a mom, you are responsible for the care and well-being of your child who is in the beginning totally dependent on you. I have learned that it’s ok for my family to be the priority and that everything else, report cards, staff meetings, outings with friends, sleep—especially sleep, they’re all on the back burner. (female, EWP, 30s, southern Ontario)

The steady presence of these parents in the lives of their children was a constant theme amongst the participants. The constancy of parenting, the commitment in time, energy, and love, forms a bond that is incredibly strong. Philosopher Martin Buber argued that teachers are only able to reach their students if they are able to build mutuality between one another. This mutuality can only exist if the child trusts the teacher and knows that she is really there for them. The teacher must gather the child into his or her life in such a way that “steady potential presence of the one to the other is established and endures” (as cited in Friedman, 1955, p. 98). The relationship that develops between a parent and child exemplifies steady presence and commitment that results in a very strong bond.

Sometimes, waiting means to remain still, so the child can lead. In both school and at home, opportunities for the child to lead are vital. Parents are encouraged to join in with their children and play what they are interested in. We are instructed not to always set the stage for activities, but rather to join our children on the floor and do as they do (Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1996). This is true for the new Kindergarten program in Ontario, as is evident in the current full-day, early
learning. Kindergarten program document (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2010), which states that there should be “a balance between educator-initiated and child-initiated activities—times when a member of the team guides the children’s learning and times when children are given opportunities to choose activities to demonstrate their knowledge” (p. 8). Child-led learning is not only being promoted for Kindergarten students in Ontario, but across all grade levels in the elementary panel. Differentiated instruction stresses that students—not textbooks—are the starting point for planning, and that student-led pedagogy provides opportunities for increased success for all students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). The notion of an emergent curriculum for young children is a foundation of the Reggio Emilia approach, where the child is seen as having “preparedness, potential, curiosity and interest in constructing their own learning . . . and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them” (Gandini, 1993, p. 5). Ruddick (1989) reported that mothers celebrate the uniqueness of each one of their children, and it is possible that, in recognizing and enjoying the differences in our own children, we become better equipped to do the same for our students. One participant explained:

I am always learning as a parent. I think what I have learned the most is that one solution or approach may work for one child but will have a horrible or little effect with the other. In terms of teaching it means we have to think of each child as an individual and make decisions based on what we know is best for each child. (female, RC, 40s, southwestern Ontario)

In waiting, many of the participants explained that they have learned to make effective use of their time. Some spoke of learning to multitask and manage their time. One participant described how she has learned to manage her time as a result of “getting married, having a husband, wanting to spend time with him, and then having children.” She continued on explaining that she is learning how to get things done with a limited amount of time, to be more efficient, and to organize and
keep everything and everyone on a schedule. She laughed, “Oh and then finding time for myself within there . . . and well, there isn’t as much as there used to be!” (female, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario).

Another participant, with adult children, explained that she learned that she needed to take time for herself, specifically time for her career—and how she learned not to feel guilty about it. This understanding came later in her life, when her children were less dependent on her for all aspects of their safety and well-being. Making time for her career and her family has been a fine balancing act, one that requires considerable time-management and organizational skills—competencies required for almost all aspects of elementary teaching (Bronte, 2009; Day, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994). More than four decades ago, Philip Jackson (1968) described the elementary classroom as having a paramount feeling of immediacy about it, and this is much the same as parenting, when a child is screaming or about to spill her milk all over the floor. Hargreaves (1994) commented that the elementary teacher’s world is “profoundly polychronic in character” (p. 104), and that this becomes all the more true as one teaches the youngest students. He explained, “It is a complex, densely packed world where the sophisticated skills of the teacher must be directed to dealing with many things at the same time” (1994, p. 104). Parenting is one way in which one can gain experience and working on multiple activities at the same time. At any given time, a parent might be cooking something, doing laundry, answering the phone, supervising a game, and helping with homework.

Waiting can also mean to expect, to look forward in anticipation. One participant detailed what she had learned about developmental expectations and young children. “I would meet with my friends and see their children who were only a few months or a year older than my son, and I couldn’t wait for him to meet the milestones that they had already achieved.” She went on to explain “I couldn’t wait for him to be six months old so that he would sit up independently, and then he
turned six months and he still wasn’t able to sit on his own” (female, NQ, 30s, GTA). Meeting in this way is an example of a community of practice, a self-organized and selected group of people who share a common sense of purpose and a desire to learn and know what each other knows (Brown & Duguid, 1996; Brown & Gray, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The participant’s friends met weekly during their maternity leave and were bound together by what Wenger (1998) describes as mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of communal resources including “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (p. 83). The women shared a joint interest and were mutually engaged in understanding their new roles as mothers.

In taking part in a community of practice, and in waiting for her son to crawl, clap his hands, and speak, the participant learned that there are very few generalizations with children and that in watching so closely to see that he was meeting his developmental milestones, she was missing the joy in the day-to-day events of his infancy. Another participant echoed this sentiment when she described how she had learned to celebrate the differences in her children, how to advocate for her children, and also how she needed to be involved in their learning in order for them to be successful. In seeing the innate uniqueness in her children and recognizing their differing needs, she is able to help her children navigate their way through the expectations of formal schooling.

As teachers, we work tirelessly to help our students meet the expectations outlined in curriculum documents that define what children are taught in Ontario public schools. These sequential and prescriptive documents detail the knowledge and skills that students are expected to develop in each subject area at each grade level. Although we differentiate the learning by recognizing and responding to the interests, preferred ways of learning, and specific learning needs of individual students, there is no denying the pressures of expectations in this era of educational
accountability. Curriculum theorists have long debated the lock-step model of expectations and objectives in curriculum planning (Aoki, 2005; Apple, 2004; Eisner, 2004; McNeil, 2004). Although the abundance of expectations and the prescribed nature of learning that such expectations require have been questioned, this linear and prescriptive approach to teaching and learning remains a dominant feature of curriculum today.

Waiting can also mean to delay or to hold back. One mother explained:

I have learned that admitting I was wrong is okay and that my kids accept that I am not perfect and it allows them to be imperfect also. I learned to trust my instincts, to support my kids when they mess up but not to bail them out. I learned that letting my kids make small non-life-threatening decisions like what to wear, taught them to be able to make decisions as adults. (female, FY, 50s, central Ontario)

In our schools, letting a student struggle and work to find a solution is a critical part of learning. Scholars and researchers recommend that children achieve success in learning through perseverance and overcoming challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Dweck, 2000; Kay 1991). During fieldwork at a handful of Japanese preschools, Daniel Walsh (2004) observed that children at play tend to have more freedom and less supervision than those at play in most Western preschools. As a result, the children are extremely physical and, in many cases, daring in their play. Adults do not step in to regulate—they entrust their children to make sensible choices and believe that such freedom is an important part of their physical and intellectual development. Walsh argues this hands-off approach allows Japanese children to realize their physical limits and gives them a sense of confidence. The young children become attuned to a healthy, physical self and, in doing so, are *genki*—“an exuberant word meaning fit, strong, healthy, and physical” (p. 102).

The participants have shared their experiences in learning to wait, whether by pausing, waiting in expectation, or by delaying or holding back their influence. In each case, the wisdom they
have acquired has implications for their careers in elementary teaching, particularly for the young children with whom they spend their days.

Learning to Wonder

The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

To wonder is to marvel, to admire, and to be amazed at. Rachel Carson wrote:

A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood… I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. (1965, pp. 42–45)

Wondering is an activity of all the senses. Insight into the wonder of children begins with attentiveness to the experiences and implications of wonder in our own lives. A child’s sense of wonder is created, nourished, and sustained when parents and other adults who are models for the child regularly interact with the child and his or her world out of palpable interest, spontaneous humor, and joy, and when those same adults show their surprise, interest, and attraction to the natural world and its happenings (Haiman, 1991). This may include the movements of a worm, icicles melting in the sun, or mold growing on an old slice of bread. Participants described learning with their children, rediscovering the beauty of a snowflake, and experiencing the fun of making a fort out of couch cushions. In opening themselves up to this sense of wonder in their own children, these parents may be more likely to welcome wonder into their classrooms. bell hooks (1994) wrote that “as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (p. 8).
Wondering is also synonymous with doubting. One participant described learning to breastfeed as a challenging learning event. She read literature and took part in prenatal classes, tried her best to help her young daughter latch, yet wasn’t confident until she joined a support group where she met with other moms, both new and experienced, to solve problems and just talk about life. This is a fine example of situated cognition, with an emphasis on interaction between the learner and other learners and tools in a sociocultural context. The more experienced members in the group may teach the less experienced, and the mothers may learn not only solutions for breastfeeding issues, but also solutions to possible future dilemmas and complexities in mothering. The context of mothering and the dialogue between mothers may take place as the mothers are feeding their children, and may therefore be integrally woven within the learning experience. From a situated view, people learn as they participate and become intimately involved with a community or culture of learning, interacting with the community and learning to understand and participate in its history, assumptions, and cultural values and rule (Fenwick, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Although the benefits of learning in authentic contexts have been established (Lave & Wenger, 1991), situated learning is not widely practiced in elementary schools due to the practical difficulties of placing students in authentic settings (Andersen, 2002). There are, however, opportunities in learning experiences such as inquiry-based mathematics and social studies, service learning, and performance arts to create “as-if” worlds (Greene, 1995, p. 320) within the school that can foster situated learning.

Wondering can also mean to ponder or reflect. Many of the participants spoke of wondering about the decisions they make and the abilities they have as parents.

As a mom you are always reflective and constantly weighing the pros and cons of decisions you make. You learn that you probably should have done things differently and often wish you could go back and fix mistakes that we know we have made. (female, FY, 50s, central Ontario)
Donald Schöhn’s (1983) reflection-in-action holds that reflection is central to mothering. Sometimes described as “thinking on our feet,” reflection-in-action involves looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, and attending to our theories in use. It entails building new understandings to inform our actions in the situation that is unfolding. In reflection-in-action, the individual experiences surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in an uncertain or unique situation. At this time, the individual reflects on the phenomenon and on any prior understandings or experiences—essentially thinking things through and drawing on what has gone before.

Time and again the participants detailed the transformative nature of parenting. One participant stated:

Every day you learn something new about your kids and you learn about your own thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions and it changes you. I cannot even begin to describe the magnitude of learning that is happening before, during and after. It is truly mind blowing when you think about it. (female, EWP, 30s, eastern Ontario)

**Discussion**

While the focus here is on learning in parenthood, the learning reported could have been on any number of life events. Much of the most important learning that we do occurs in these moments of transition, whether it happens to be a birth, a death, a marriage, a divorce, caring for an aging parent, a transition between careers or locations, or some other major influential event that provokes us into a concentrated period of informal or unintentional learning. Merriam and Clark (1993) explain that life-course shaping or influencing knowledge can occur at any place and within a very short period of time, in a moment of “perspective transformation” (Mezirow, 1991) or an “organizing circumstance” (Spear, 1988).
This is echoed by Resichmann (1986) who uses the French phrase *en passant*, meaning “by passing by,” to explain how, by actively passing through life, individuals encounter many different kinds of learning opportunities and challenges that both educate and transform them. In contrast to informal, non-formal, and non-traditional learning (terms with a negative connotation), en passant recognizes these kinds of learning positively. Reischmann described learning en passant as unintentional learning that might arise from otherwise unplanned tasks or events. He characterized learning en passant as being individualized, integrated, holistic, not compulsory, and built on previous learning. Learning en passant can only be identified by looking back—in other words, through reflection. Reischmann laments that this kind of learning is often forgotten in both theory and in practice of lifelong learning in adults.

What is it about the life experiences that render them such powerful learning? Merriam and Clark (1993) suggest that each involves an expansion of skills and abilities, and a transformed sense of self or life perspective. The participants who described parenting as a valuable learning experience noted that they had developed significantly, not only as parents, but often as educators, and as human beings. Their experiences and stories varied, but what connects them is a transformed sense of self and an increase in personal capacity. The intense learning that transpires through parenting demonstrates that unintentional learning is truly powerful as it is at once experiential, situated, reflective, and embodied. Our work life, our family life, and our community life are punctuated with incidences of unplanned learning. Indeed, all life experiences are potentially learning experiences and there are many other informal learning contexts that offer opportunities to develop the qualities and characteristics central to teaching such as vitality, caring, humility, imagination, heart, vulnerability, connectedness, and passion (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006; Palmer, 1998; Smithrim, 2000). These qualities are not learned in a formal setting, by mastering specific techniques or skills. For example,
Nel Noddings writes that we learn to care first by learning “what it means to be cared for, then to care for intimate others, and finally to care about those we cannot care for directly” (2002, p. 31).

The relationship between life experience and learning is complex. Some particularly thoughtful observations come from philosopher John Dewey (1938) who explored the “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 12). Careful to note that not all experience educates, Dewey explained that, in order for an experience to be educational, it must be meaningfully connected to further and richer experiences. He writes, “An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his [or her] environment” (p. 41). To learn from experience, then

is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experience with the world to find out what it was like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things. (Dewey, 1916, p. 147)

In becoming a parent, the participants have experienced a deep sense of connection to their children, and often their students. The implications of such an intense and meaningful life experience had significant reported impact on the classroom environments of the participants. Parker Palmer (1998) wrote that a relational way of knowing “in which love takes away fear and co-creation replaces control—is a way of knowing that can help us reclaim the capacity for connectedness on which good teaching depends” (p. 56). The learning reported here suggests that the lessons learned informally throughout one’s life offer compelling implications for improving teaching.
The purpose of this research study was to provide an enriched sense of the impact of teacher personal learning on elementary teachers and their students, and to suggest potential strategies to teachers for bridging their personal lives with their professional careers. The research also characterized the richness of personal learning, and determined the effects of engaged personal learning on teachers’ in-school practices and on student engagement in school. In order to achieve these research goals, the phenomenon of personal learning was examined from the perspective of elementary teachers who had taken part in personal learning opportunities, with the aim of describing the effects of these kinds of learning on both the teachers and their students.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first three sections, I revisit the main research questions of the study. I begin by exploring the features of the personal learning opportunities that the elementary teachers engaged in across their career stages. Next, I discuss the underlying purposes and motivations that the teachers assign to these personal learning opportunities. In the third section, the discussion centres on the extent to which the participants’ engagement in personal learning plays out in their classrooms. This discussion is extended in the fourth section, where implications for teachers, elementary students, teacher education programs, and organizations that support elementary teaching are presented. I also describe the surprises and challenges I encountered during the research process. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are next, followed by my final thoughts on education and schooling.
Features of Personal Learning Opportunities

The participants in this study are engaged in the curriculum of life, and their life experiences—such as home improvements, physical health and fitness, travel, and parenting—have provided opportunities for rich and enduring learning. Meaningful learning has occurred in and through these life events and the reported contexts and experiences of the personal learning described in this research provide a prism of paradigms, theories, ideas, and frameworks. The curriculum of life is learned through self-directed, reflective, transformative, informal, and incidental experiences. The learning is situated, embodied, and meaningful. The teachers who engage in personal learning bring their intellect, emotions, memories, needs, and physical bodies to interact with the new learning. The experiences of the participants show that the learning process is much more than systematically acquiring and storing information. It is also making sense of our lives, transforming not just what we learn but the way we learn.

The context of the learning is also important. Much of the learning undertaken by the participants was informal in nature and took place with family and friends, in the form of hobbies, leisure activities, and utilitarian need. This resonates with the work of Hager and Halliday (2006), who remind us:

It is not necessarily helpful to draw a distinction between learning and living. It has been normal to learn in the course of living long before there were even institutions concerned with formal learning such as schools. . . . It is worth remembering that people did all kinds of imaginative, useful and beautiful things long before there was talk of [learning contexts, formal and informal learning]. Great bridges, churches, houses, songs and so on came into existence long before it was fashionable to distinguish between work, living and learning in so sharp a way as is the case now. (p. 48)

Most of the participants in this study did not differentiate their learning from their daily living; in fact, in many cases, the participants did not consider their experiences to be learning until they were probed during interviews or until they took the time to really reflect on their experiences.
Why They Learn

The participants in this study indicated that they take part in personal learning to bring balance, health, wonder, challenge, and satisfaction to their lives. This is reflective of the relation between personal learning and the notion of leisure, which is defined as a “combination of the perception of choice, intrinsic motivation, freedom from evaluation, relaxation, and enjoyment” (Kleiber, 1999, p. 3). Personal learning provides space for the things that intrigue us most in our adult lives. Research and scholarly writing on adult learning indicate that adults who take time to enjoy learning not related to their work often experience greater life satisfaction (Dupuis & Smale, 1995; Fisher, 2003; Nimrod, 2007).

This sentiment is reinforced by Koopman (2005) who writes of fulfillment and quality of life. He suggests:

The quality of our life is determined by the way we give shape to the abundance of time we have at our disposal. We have to engage in meaningful practices if we are to make something of our existence. If we do not, we are delivered—in Gadamer’s words—to the tyranny of empty time: we are doomed either to a life of boredom or to a life filled with frenetic and futile activity. (p. 93)

The participants in this study were engaged in meaningful and fulfilling practices, both in their personal lives, and in their careers.

Classroom Impact

Inspiring their students to engage in meaningful and fulfilling learning opportunities was at the essence of these teachers’ classrooms. Simply put, these teachers energized and inspired their students—an ability that transcends mere facility with a technique or a method. Just as the personal learning of the adult participants has shown, the learning process is much more than the accumulation and collection of facts. Intrator and Kunzman (2006) contend that a teacher’s capacity to teach well is linked to a set of ineffable, hard-to-codify qualities that often become characterized
as heart, passion, or connectedness. These intricate qualities emerge from the inner or core landscape of a teacher’s life and represent the integral feature of inspired and memorable teaching. They argue that a teacher’s capacity to remain vital, present, and deeply connected throughout his or her career requires consistent attention and nourishing of the inner life or core dimensions of teachers.

One way that the teachers in this study attend to their inner lives is by spending time on things that matter to them, by remembering the person in the professional. These teachers not only take time to engage in learning for themselves, but also bring their interests and understandings into their teaching. Just as they bring their whole person to their own learning, they bring their whole person to their teaching. This approach results in rich, vital classroom environments and a rich, vital model of what learners can be and do.

Marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson wrote that, “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in” (1965, p. 43). The authenticity of the personal learning that the teachers participate in cultivated their sense of wonder, a notion articulated by pianist Glenn Gould. Gould wrote, “The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline but rather the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity” (2002). The art that Gould referred to could easily be the personal learning that the participants engaged in, and the lifelong construction of wonder and serenity could equally represent the ways in which the participants encouraged and shared this excitement for learning with their students. When the teachers model and share their quest to approach new learning with wonder and enchantment, students learn to perseverance and overcome challenges. Parker Palmer (1983) proposed that “when a teacher is continually exploring uncharted territory, humility and openness to grace are cultivated. That teacher is reminded that he or she doesn’t know it all” (p. 114). This is a significant
lesson for both teachers and their students, in that learning happens both in and outside of school, and that knowledge is extended throughout one's lifetime.

Implications

Findings from this study increase our appreciation of personal learning and of the contribution that teachers make when they bring their learning to their classrooms and their students. Attending to the person within the profession is not only dependent on the teachers, but also requires that teacher education programs and provincial organizations understand and value the richness of learning—including non-professional learning—that is treasured by educators outside of their work. Therefore, this section includes recommendations for both teachers and the programs and organizations that prepare and support them throughout their teaching careers.

Implications for Teachers

As a result of this study, I have a few words of advice for teachers. *Continue to learn in all aspects of your life.* The participants of this study not only took part in professional learning throughout their careers, but also made time for learning with family and friends, in all aspects of their lives. The results demonstrate that, by challenging yourself and experiencing growth and accomplishment in meaningful ways, you may approach your teaching with increased vitality. The effects of this are twofold: First, you will have increased energy and enthusiasm for teaching, learning, and your young students, and second, you will be more likely to provide rich, differentiated, and meaningful learning opportunities for your students.

*Be brave.* Have the courage to follow your passions and interests and make time in your very busy lives to make your personal learning pursuits count. Just as my colleagues carved out time in their workweek to make art together, elementary teachers can come together and talk, run, cook, read, and play. Just because our profession does not ask us to take part in personal learning does not mean that we shouldn’t do it. Include the personal learning that you do and that you plan to do on
your Annual Learning Plan, even though you’re not asked to. If we model and value learning in all aspects of our life, not just the ones that are required, we can demonstrate why the personal is as important as the professional, and perhaps we can lead the way to creating change in how personal learning is honoured and valued.

Find one another. The findings of this study show that shared experience is a key feature of engaged learning for both adults and children. Most of the participants in this study do not know of one another. Imagine if the boat-builder in the final years of his career knew that there was a teacher, just established in his career and only half-an-hour away, who was exploring ways to bring his recent experiences of home renovation and carpentry to his intermediate students. By making meaningful connections, not only to learning, but to other people, teachers can increase engagement in elementary student learning. Relatedness is composed of a caring environment, a sense of belonging, collaborative spirit, and ownership of learning, and can be supported by teachers who experience similar qualities in their personal learning endeavours. Nel Noddings (1984) wrote of feeling joy in relatedness—whether in relation to persons, other living things, or ideas. She explained that joy is an awareness of connectedness, of harmony, excitement, serenity, and the sense of being in tune with one another. Paulo Friere discussed the value of bringing this sense of joy into the school:

By living humility, lovingness, courage, tolerance, competence, decisiveness, patience-impatience, and verbal parsimony, we contribute to creating a happy, joyful school. We forge a school-adventure, a school that marches on, that is not afraid of the risks, and that rejects immobility. It is a school that thinks, that participates, that creates, that speaks, that loves, that guesses, that passionately embraces and says yes to life. (1998, p. 45)

The notion of creating a happy and joyful school is echoed by Alfred North Whitehead (1929) who believed that there should be spontaneous joy in learning—“that joy is its life” (p. 490). In fact, Whitehead (1929) used the term joy to illustrate the desirable state of mind in both teacher
and learner. Joy has been described by scholars and researchers alike in relation to learning. Carl Leggo argued that “a curriculum of joy is always connected to experiences of the body, heart, imagination, and mind” (2004, p. 32). Frederickson (2002) observed that joy creates the urge to play, push the limits, and be creative, not only in social and physical behaviour but also in intellectual and artistic behaviour. What a wonderful outcome for our students. Creating spaces for joy in schools is vital to learning, and in order to prepare for joy in our classrooms, we teachers need to start with ourselves. By finding more time in our own lives for personal learning that promotes connection within ourselves, connection with one another, and connection with the world, elementary teachers may increase the likelihood of finding joy in teaching and learning.

Intrator and Kunzman (2006) contend that a teacher’s capacity to engage in teaching that both energizes and inspires students eludes easy characterization. While this may be true, the results of this study indicate that one way that teachers can strengthen this ability is by learning for themselves. The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, (1994) proclaims that “the central agent in the formal learning process and the lives of students at school is the teacher. Well-educated and motivated teachers are the most vital component of high-quality education” (p. 98). The elementary teachers who participated in this study were not only well educated in a broad sense, but also highly motivated to learn and to share their love of learning with their young students.

There is a vital interplay between our personal selves and our professional obligations. The growing call for accountability, standards, performance appraisals, and constantly changing mandates should not overshadow our ongoing attention to our personal selves. This sentiment is shared by Connell (1993), who wrote that “learning is a full-blooded human, social process, and so is teaching” (p. 63). If teachers do not experience learning in this manner, how will they be able to adequately convey this to their students? Sustained, substantial investment in the personal growth of teachers is ultimately an investment in schools and student learning.
Implications for Programs That Support Elementary Teaching and Learning

Teachers should be encouraged, in all stages of their careers, to develop their knowledge and experience, not only in pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies, but also in their own passions and interests. Elementary teachers should be supported to continue to develop as both persons and as educators. Parker Palmer (1998) suggests that teacher identity and integrity are at the heart of good teaching and help teachers form deep connections to themselves, their students, and the subjects they teach. Those responsible for teacher education must also continue to learn and grow and to examine not only how they are supporting professional skills and scholarship, but also how they are challenging beginning teachers to develop and foster the dispositions essential for effective teaching and lifelong learning.

In Peter Senge’s influential book, *Schools That Learn* (2000), he contends that if schools are to be successful in an increasingly competitive world—and if educators are to help students overcome systemic inequities—then schools must become organizations staffed by individuals who know how to learn and grow. Learning here is not limited to professional knowledge, unlike this statement from the Ontario College of Teachers, which asserts that “ongoing and self-directed professional learning are integral to and embedded in teacher professionalism” (OCT, 2010, p. 18). While the College has developed a Professional Learning Framework that “takes into account individual career and personal priorities” (p. 23), there is no indication of specific opportunities for learning that might appeal to personal interests or goals as the teachers move through their careers. This endorsement is clearly of much less magnitude than the support for teachers’ professional learning. In fact, some school boards don’t value personal learning, even though the teachers in this study recognize that it makes them better teachers.

A stunning example of how our profession values professional over personal learning was provided to me by way of an email exchange between myself and an Ontario School Board that
chose not to support my research study in their jurisdiction. After a careful review of my application, the committee decided not to grant clearance for this research because they gave priority to professional learning. They advised me to ask teachers if they are currently enrolled in AQ courses or courses related to graduate degrees or whether they had recently completed such courses. The committee explained that such learning is very important to the development of teacher practice. The committee also suggested that I provide specific examples of professional learning in my survey, such as graduate courses, and professional development offered by the school boards.

In no uncertain terms, this response made it very clear that the school board did not value personal learning. However, the research reported in this study clearly indicates that the elementary teachers themselves value learning. Without denying the importance of professional learning, these teachers also value opportunities to engage in personal learning. While the types of learning may lead to different outcomes, the research has demonstrated that both types of learning are valued. Now that this research has come to a close, I have crafted a response to the email described above:

Thank you for your careful review of my research application. Now that I have conducted my research, I feel that it is important that I share with you the reasons why you cannot afford to discount the personal learning of the teachers in your school board. While the findings of this study did not discount the importance of professional development, they did reveal significant benefits of teacher personal learning for both the teachers and their students. The participants in this study were engaged in personal learning throughout their careers. As a result of taking part in these meaningful activities, they were able to foster meaningful learning that was both collaborative and supportive for their classes. The participants demonstrated passion and commitment for learning in general, and this sentiment was echoed in their students. The participants brought their interests and talents to their teaching and encouraged their students to do the same. They instilled a love of learning in their students. I urge you to consider personal learning as an integral component in teacher professional growth and, ultimately, in student success.

The Ottawa Carleton District School Board provides an example of a school board that is committed to creating inspired learning experiences. Its continuing education program, Learning for
Life, offers an extensive selection of workshops and programs designed to help community members “learn a new skill, discover a new passion, or let their creativity shine” (OCDSB, 2011, p. 2). With offerings including belly dancing, bicycle repair, playing bridge, organic gardening, common household repairs, astronomy, and yoga, this program sees more than 12,000 individuals enrol each year. This continuing education program illustrates that learning for life is valuable for the general population, and yet these kinds of learning opportunities are not recognized as such for elementary educators. What message does this send to teachers about the kinds of learning that are worthwhile? The results of this study indicate that the kinds of learning opportunities that are offered in Learning for Life are not only valuable for elementary teachers, but are also vital for a profession that is required to be skilled, passionate, and creative.

Had I not undertaken this research, I would not have known the breadth and depth of the learning experiences of my colleagues. I would also not have been aware of the many ways that elementary teachers in Ontario are bringing themselves and their passions and interests to their students. I was surprised to learn that many of the participants did not recognize the many ways that they are engaged in learning across their lives. In fact, it wasn’t until I spoke with participants that I really reflected on all the learning experiences that I myself have taken part in. This lack of recognition and acknowledgement is problematic if there is going to be a shift in the kinds of learning that are valued for teachers and students—a shift that the present research indicates as something highly desirable.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from the present study invite re-examination of all of the kinds of learning that teachers take part in—including learning that is not directly related to the profession. It became apparent that the scope of personal learning activities described on the survey were incomplete, due to the emergence of the parenting theme that was not anticipated when the survey was designed.
The findings reveal that important learning also happens through significant life events, daily activities, and relationships and further investigation of these kinds of learning could confirm or expand the findings identified in the current research.

As recruitment for this study was limited to only two publicly-funded school boards, 13 independent schools in Ontario, and two websites, many elementary teachers in Ontario and all elementary teachers in other parts of Canada were not included in this study. Future research could purposely identify and recruit a wider sample of teachers who engage in personal learning and explore the different ways that personal learning is experienced and recognized.

Further exploration into personal learning across teachers’ careers, particularly research that reflects the complexity of contemporary career patterns, would be beneficial. The findings, as a whole, suggest that it is life’s events, not time in teaching that is the significant factor in the shifts and variations in personal learning across one’s career. Future research on significant life events that may or may not correlate with career stages would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the richness of personal learning in adulthood. It would be valuable to explore the particular contexts of the personal learning that are most effective and engaging for the teachers, so these qualities may be transferred to all learning offered to teachers. It would also be useful to consider how we can support teachers who want to do more personal learning, so supports may be put in place to present opportunities for personal learning.

The findings from the observation scales used to document levels of student engagement in the elementary classrooms were used only to verify reported practices and were not developed as fully as they could have been in this study. Additional work could utilize a similar instrument and explore what engaged and meaningful learning looks like when elementary teachers take part in personal learning. Differences between publicly and independently funded schools—in how they support personal learning and how teachers experience the learning that is provided—require
further investigation. In the present study, two of the interview participants and one of the observation participants worked in independently funded schools, and these teachers found that their professional learning included learning that was of personal interest. It would be interesting to see the extent to which these ideals are adopted in other independent schools and the impact that such support for personal learning has on teachers and students.

A longitudinal study of what happens to the students who are in classrooms such as those featured in this study would also be of interest, as it would further examine how teachers’ love of learning impacts students’ formal, informal, and non-formal learning over a long period of time. This research focused mainly on teachers’ personal learning; while it examined classroom settings, more research is needed to further understanding of the impact that the teachers’ love of learning has on students’ learning. This research could be conducted as a retrospective study, examining how having an inspiring teacher impacted students’ perceptions of learning and investigating the perceived qualities of those teachers that resonated and remained with the students.

**Final Thoughts: Education and Schooling**

What is perhaps most striking about the findings of this research is that the portraits of the teachers and their classrooms portray an extraordinary and heartening commitment to education. By education, here, I mean much more than schooling—whether that schooling describes the experiences of students in elementary schools or the schooling that is part of teacher professional development.

The conversation about what education is goes back to Aristotle, who noted that the subject matter that mattered most was education that promoted *eudaimonia*, a concept that has no precise modern equivalent in English. Usually translated as happiness, other interpretations include well-being and human flourishing. Coulter and Wiens (2008) translate *eudaimonia* as “a good and worthwhile life” (p. 12) and explain that determining what counts as educational learning, that is,
learning that contributes to leading a good and worthwhile life, involves addressing questions surrounding the kinds of learning that are most important, who decides, and on what basis.

Education has been defined as entailing both the acquisition of knowledge and the formation of character. This definition relates to why human societies educate children to begin with—to cultivate the young so that they grow up to be happy, fulfilled adults, living in community. As Coulter and Wiens (2008) note, “education’s Latin root, *educare*, that is, to lead out, captures the responsibility of piloting children from the private world of the family to the public world and figuring how, when, and whether to help children contribute to it, is the very stuff of education” (p. 11). Although this conversation has ensued since it was first conceived and recorded by the Greeks, deciding what counts as education is still up for debate.

There are many stated and unstated purposes of schooling in contemporary Western societies. These include the transmission of knowledge; socialization and acculturation; selection and differentiation of children; creating a sense of social responsibility, and development of the individual (Egan, 1996; Harmon & Stokes Jones, 2005; Noddings, 2005). Woven through these purposes of schooling are various debates surrounding curriculum—the selection of knowledge and ways of teaching that a society selects as most important. Indeed, curriculum can be viewed as a reflection of the elements that a society consciously, or even unconsciously, values. But these notions of schooling do not necessarily encompass education in the broader sense that I have described. In fact, the purposes of schooling can be traced back to Plato and his notion that education was to be a process of learning about those forms of knowledge that would cultivate the mind, promote mastery of intellectual knowledge, provide a privileged view of reality, and transcend politics and society (Egan, 1996). In most Western countries the academic curriculum that has been most privileged is that of the ‘three r’s’—reading, writing, and arithmetic. Other academic subjects (e.g. music, geography, history, and health) do not engender the same attention and political sway, as
evidenced by the lack of a testing culture surrounding these subjects, and time devoted to them in
the curriculum (Roth et al., 2003). In a parallel way, as evidenced by the responses of some of the
school boards I attempted to involve in the study, personal learning—or *education*—on the part of
teachers is not always accorded the same attention as professional learning—or *schooling*—as a form
of professional development. This is not to say that one cannot be educated through schooling;
rather, it is to say that schooling is a limited view of education.

Ultimately this research demonstrates that education in its broadest sense (including, but not
limited to schooling) can be of benefit to teachers and their students. The Ontario College of
Teachers (2010) states that “teacher learning is directly correlated to student learning” (p. 23) and
that teaching “is a highly contextual and multidimensional profession that draws on teachers’
intellectual, creative, spiritual and moral qualities” (p. 16). The findings of this study demonstrate
that personal learning on the part of elementary teachers also impacts student learning and
engagement and that when teachers take time to learn about the things that intrigue them on a
personal level, they are better equipped to bring wonder, adventure, relatedness, and joy to their
teaching. One could argue that they are, in a word, better *educated*. Sustained investment in the
personal is ultimately an investment in schools and student learning. The research reported here
supports the claim that this type of sustained investment is fundamental for an educational system
that encourages lifelong learning in students. For if we are to instill a love of learning and a desire
for lifelong learning in our students, as teachers, we must first have it ourselves.
References


Appendix A

Approval from Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, Letters of Information and Consent Forms

August 3, 2010

Ms. Holly Ogden
Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Duncan McArthur Hall
Queen’s University

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-519-10
Title: “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”

Dear Ms. Ogden:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage http://www.queensex.ca/orc/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html – Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensex.ca/orc/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or Irving@queensex.ca prior to implementation. Mrs. Irving will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc.: Dr. Rena Uptin, Faculty Supervisor
     Dr. Lesly Wade-woolley, Chair, Unit REB
     E-REB: c/o Graduate Studies & Bureau of Research, Attn: Celina Freitas

JS/gi
Letter of Information for Interview Participants

Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

My name is Holly Ogden, I am a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. I am writing to request your participation in research called “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”. The ultimate goal of my research is to provide an enriched sense of the effects of personal learning on both elementary teachers and their students, and to provide both pre- and in-service teachers with strategies for bridging their personal lives with their professional careers. This study was granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board for compliance with the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans”, and Queen's policies.

In the first part of the research project, questionnaires were distributed to 1600 elementary educators across Ontario. You filled out one of these questionnaires. In the second part of the research, I would like to conduct interviews with fifteen participants to identify how they pursue personal learning interests and to characterize the richness of these kinds of learning. You have been selected based on your questionnaire responses and your willingness to participate in an interview, as indicated on the bottom of your questionnaire.

The interview will be conducted at a location of your choice and will last a maximum of one hour. The interview will be audio taped. The taped interview will be transcribed and then the recording will be destroyed. All electronic files will be password protected. None of the data will contain your name, or the identity of your place or work. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible. A pseudonym will replace your name to protect your identity. You will not be identified in any way if the results are published, and nothing will connect you to your responses. All data will be stored in a secure computer file, accessible only to me and to my supervisory committee. In accordance with Queen’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years after which it will be destroyed.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions you find objectionable or uncomfortable. You may withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and you may request the removal of part of all of your data from the study. The results of this study may be shared with academics and practitioners through the writing of reports, papers, and conference presentations. If the data are used for secondary analysis they will contain no identifying information.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Holly Ogden at holly.ogden@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Yours sincerely,

Holly Ogden
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Consent Form for Interview Participants

Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

- I agree to participate in the study entitled “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”, conducted through the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University.
- I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and the purpose of the study is explained to my satisfaction.
- I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore how the personal learning of elementary teachers impacts in-school practices and student engagement in school.
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that my participation will take the form of an interview at a location of my choice and that the interview will last a maximum of one hour.
- I understand that the interviews will be audio taped and that the taped interviews will be transcribed and then the tape will be destroyed.
- I understand that, upon request, I may have a full description of the results of the study after its completion.
- I understand that the researcher intends to publish the findings of the study.
- I understand that confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible by appropriate storage and access of data and by the removal of my name from the data.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time and that I may request the removal of all or part of my data without negative consequences.
- I am aware that any questions about study participation may be directed to Holly Ogden at holly.ogden@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. I am also aware that any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Holly Ogden.

Retain the second copy for your records.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.
Participant’s Name (Please Print): ________________________________________
Participant’s Signature: _______________________________________________________
Date: ______________________

If you would like a copy of the results of the study please provide your email or postal address below:
Letter of Information for Parents

Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

My name is Holly Ogden, I am a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. I am writing to request permission for your child to participate in research called “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”. The ultimate goal of my research is to provide an enriched sense of the effects of personal learning on both elementary teachers and their students, and to provide both pre- and in-service teachers with strategies for bridging their personal lives with their professional careers. This study was granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board for compliance with the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans”, and Queen's policies.

In the first part of the research project, questionnaires were distributed to 1600 elementary educators across Ontario. Your child’s teacher filled out one of these questionnaires. In the second part of the research, I conducted interviews with fifteen participants, one of whom was your child’s teacher. In the third part of the research, I will be observing five elementary classrooms. The classroom observations will take place over a period of approximately two days, up to a maximum of 10 hours. I will take extensive written notes and use a checklist to record levels of engaged learning among students. I will audiotape “teacher talk”, student discussions, and informal conversations between students as they work to clarify my written notes. The audio recording will be transcribed and then the recording will be destroyed. All electronic files will be password protected. Your child’s confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible. All electronic files will be password protected. None of the data will contain your child’s name, or the name of your child’s school. Paper and audio data will be secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home and a pseudonym will replace your child’s name to protect his or her identity. All data will be stored in a secure computer file accessible only to me and my supervisory committee. In accordance with Queen’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years after which it will be destroyed.

I do not foresee risks in your child’s participation in this research. Your child’s participation is entirely voluntary. Your child is not obliged to answer any questions he or she finds objectionable or uncomfortable. Your child may withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and you may request the removal of your child’s data from the study. The results of this study may be shared with academics and practitioners through the writing of reports, papers, and conference presentations. If the data are used for secondary analysis they will contain no identifying information.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Holly Ogden at holly.ogden@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Yours sincerely,

Holly Ogden
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Letter of Information for Observation Participants

Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

My name is Holly Ogden, I am a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. I am writing to request your participation in research called “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”. The ultimate goal of my research is to provide an enriched sense of the effects of personal learning on both elementary teachers and their students, and to provide both pre- and in-service teachers with strategies for bridging their personal lives with their professional careers. This study was granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board for compliance with the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans”, and Queen's policies.

In the first part of the research project, questionnaires were distributed to 1600 elementary educators across Ontario. You filled out one of these questionnaires. In the second part of the research, I conducted interviews with fifteen participants to identify how they pursue personal learning interests and to characterize the richness of these kinds of learning. You were selected and took part in an interview. In the final part of the research, I will observe five elementary classrooms to explore how the personal learning of elementary teachers impacts in-school practices and student engagement in school. You have been selected as an observation participant based on your interview responses and your willingness to participate in classroom observations, as indicated during the interview.

The classroom observations will take place over a period of approximately two days, up to a maximum of 10 hours. I will take extensive written notes and use a checklist to record levels of engaged learning among students. I will audiotape “teacher talk”, student discussions, and informal conversations between students as they work to clarify my written notes. The audio recording will be transcribed and then the recording will be destroyed. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible. All electronic files will be password protected. None of the data will contain your name, or the name of your school. A pseudonym will replace your name to protect your identity. All data will be stored in a secure computer file accessible only to me and my supervisory committee. In accordance with Queen’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years after which it will be destroyed.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions you find objectionable or uncomfortable. You may withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and you may request the removal of part of all of your data from the study. The results of this study may be shared with academics and practitioners through the writing of reports, papers, and conference presentations. If the data are used for secondary analysis they will contain no identifying information.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Holly Ogden at holly.ogden@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Yours sincerely,

Holly Ogden
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
Parental Consent Form for Student Participation in Classroom Observations
Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

- I understand that my child will be participating in the research study entitled “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”, conducted through the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University.
- I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and the purpose of the study is explained to my satisfaction.
- I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore how the personal learning of elementary teachers impacts in-school practices and student engagement in school.
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that an audio recorder will be used to record classroom activities and student discussions and that after the study has been completed the data will be destroyed.
- I understand that, upon request, I may have a full description of the results of the study after its completion.
- I understand that the researcher intends to publish the findings of the study.
- I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary and that my child is free to withdraw from this study at any time and that I may request the removal of all or part of my child’s data without negative consequences.
- I have been assured that confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms and through the protection of raw data via locked cabinets (paper data, audio data) or by password protection (electronic data).
- I am aware that any questions about study participation may be directed to Holly Ogden at holly.ogden@queensu.ca or the researcher’s supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. I am also aware that any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Holly Ogden.
Retain the second copy for your records.

My child has given voluntary assent to participate in the research.

Student’s Name (Please Print): ________________________________________
Parent/Guardian Name (Please Print):  __________________________________
Parent/Guardian Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ______________________

If you would like a copy of the results of the study please provide your email or postal address below:
Consent Form for Teacher Participation in Classroom Observations
Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

- I understand that I will be participating in the research study entitled “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”, conducted through the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University.
- I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and the purpose of the study is explained to my satisfaction.
- I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore how the personal learning of elementary teachers impacts in-school practices and student engagement in school.
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that an audio recorder will be used to record classroom activities and student discussions and that after the study has been completed the data will be destroyed.
- I understand that, upon request, I may have a full description of the results of the study after its completion.
- I understand that the researcher intends to publish the findings of the study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time and that I may request the removal of all or part of my data without negative consequences.
- I have been assured that confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms and through the protection of raw data via locked cabinets (paper data, audio data) or by password protection (electronic data).
- I am aware that any questions about study participation may be directed to Holly Ogden at holly.ogden@queensu.ca or the researcher’s supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. I am also aware that any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Holly Ogden.
Retain the second copy for your records.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant’s Name (Please Print): ________________________________________

Participant’s Signature: ________________________________________________

Date: ______________________

If you would like a copy of the results of the study please provide your email or postal address below:
Consent Form for the use of Still Photographs of Children

Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

I agree to allow researcher Holly Ogden to use photographs of my child and/or his or her work that she collects as part of her research entitled “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers” for one or more of the following purposes:

1. Demonstration at a Conference:

   Initials of Parent or Guardian: ________

2. Demonstration at Teacher Professional Development Activities:

   Initials of Parent or Guardian: ________

3. Demonstration to Teacher Candidates:

   Initials of Parent or Guardian: ________

4. Publication in an On-line (electronic) Journal:

   Initials of Parent or Guardian: ________

5. Publication in a print Journal or book:

   Initials of Parent or Guardian: ________

6. Publication on a Web site (e.g., http://www.educ.queensu.ca/~arts/):

   Initials of Parent or Guardian: ________

I understand that my child's name will not be associated with this work, but also, that he/she may be identified through the images. I also understand that my child may, on any occasion, refuse permission to have him/herself and/or his/her work photographed and that he/she may, nevertheless, continue to be part of this study. I have signed two copies of this consent form and kept one for my records.

Name of Child: ___________________________________________________________
Signature of Parent of Guardian: __________________________________________
Date: ___________________________
Consent Form for the use of Still Photographs of the Teacher

Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

I agree to allow researcher Holly Ogden to use photographs of myself and my classroom that she collects as part of her research entitled “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers” for one or more of the following purposes:

1. Demonstration at a Conference:
   
   Initials: _______

2. Demonstration at Teacher Professional Development Activities:
   
   Initials: _______

3. Demonstration to Teacher Candidates:
   
   Initials: _______

4. Publication in an On-line (electronic) Journal:
   
   Initials: _______

5. Publication in a print Journal or book:
   
   Initials: _______

6. Publication on a Web site (e.g., http://www.educ.queensu.ca/~arts/):
   
   Initials: _______

I understand that my name will not be associated with this work, but also, that I may be identified through the images. I also understand that I may, on any occasion, refuse permission to have myself and my classroom photographed and that I may, nevertheless, continue to be part of this study. I have signed two copies of this consent form and kept one for my records.

Name of Participant: __________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant: _____________________________________________________
Date: ________________________________
Appendix B

Data Collection Instruments: Questionnaire, Interview Questions and Observation Recording Sheets

Questionnaire

My name is Holly Ogden, and I am a doctoral candidate at Queen’s University. As part of my work in the Faculty of Education I am conducting a research study called “Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers”. This research considers teachers who learn for their own personal interests and well-being, and investigates how this type of learning impacts the teachers themselves, as well as their classrooms and students. This study was granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board for compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans, and Queen's policies.

I would appreciate your participation in completing this questionnaire. The questionnaire will take 10-15 minutes to complete. Participating in this study is completely voluntary and there are no known risks associated with participating. You are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason without penalty by simply exiting the survey before the end. You are not obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable. You will not be identified in any way if the results are published and nothing will connect you to your responses. All data will be stored in a secure computer file accessible only to me and my supervisory committee. In accordance with Queen’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years after which it will be destroyed.

If you have any questions about this research or you would like a copy of the data analysis, feel free to contact me, Holly Ogden, at holly.ogden@queensu.ca. Any questions about study participation may be directed my supervisor Dr. Rena Upitis at 613-533-6212 or rena.upitis@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Holly Ogden

If you consent to participate in this study, click “Continue.”

Otherwise, you may exit the study.
Part One: Demographic Information and Teaching Experience

Please answer the following demographic questions:

1. What is your gender?
   - [ ] Male
   - [ ] Female
   - [ ] Other

2. What is your age?
   - [ ] 20 - 29
   - [ ] 30 - 39
   - [ ] 40 - 49
   - [ ] 50 - 59
   - [ ] 60 - 69
   - [ ] 70 +

3. What is the highest level of education you have attained? (Check all that apply)
   - [ ] College diploma
   - [ ] Bachelor's degree
   - [ ] Master's degree
   - [ ] Ph.D.

4. What is your geographic location?
   - [ ] GTA
   - [ ] Southern Ontario
   - [ ] South-western Ontario
   - [ ] Central Ontario
   - [ ] Northern Ontario
   - [ ] Eastern Ontario

Please answer the following questions regarding your teaching experience:

5. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
   - [ ] 0-3 years
   - [ ] 4-7 years
   - [ ] 8-10 years
   - [ ] 11-15 years
   - [ ] 16-20 years
   - [ ] 21-25 years
   - [ ] 26-30 years
   - [ ] 30 + years

6. What is your current teaching position?
   - [ ] Full-time Contract
   - [ ] Part-time Contract
   - [ ] Long-term Occasional
   - [ ] Administration
   - [ ] Occasional
   - [ ] Other (please specify)
7. What grade(s) are you currently teaching? (Check all that apply)

- [ ] JK
- [ ] SK
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3
- [ ] 4
- [ ] 5
- [ ] 6
- [ ] 7
- [ ] 8
- [ ] Planning Time
- [ ] Special Education
- [ ] French
- [ ] Other (please specify)

8. In what divisions are you qualified to teach? (Check all that apply)

- [ ] Primary
- [ ] Junior
- [ ] Intermediate
- [ ] Senior

9. What additional qualifications do you hold? (Check all that apply)

- [ ] Special education
- [ ] Reading
- [ ] ESL
- [ ] French
- [ ] Technological education
- [ ] Outdoor education
- [ ] Principals qualifications
- [ ] Other (please specify)

10. What is your school setting?

- [ ] Urban
- [ ] Suburban
- [ ] Rural

11. In what kind of school do you teach?

- [ ] Public
- [ ] Private
12. Since you have begun your teaching career, how many times have you taken part in the following personal learning experiences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>SETTING</th>
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</table>

Formal learning is deliberate, instructor-directed, systematic delivery of curriculum with well-defined specifications, often leading to formal certification.

Non-formal learning is deliberate, systematic, and occurs in a planned but highly adaptable manner in institutions, organizations, and situations beyond spheres of formal or informal education. Non-formal learning is not teacher-directed.

Informal learning generally results from daily life activities without pre-established curricula. Informal learning can be supported by access to Internet resources, such as search engines and websites, and includes hobbies and self-help efforts. Informal learning also encompasses the incidental learning that occurs with interactions amongst family, coworkers, community members, and the environment.

13. Have you taken part in any other personal learning experiences?
   C Yes (please explain)   C No
14. In what ways has your participation in your own personal learning changed throughout your teaching career? Please list the factors that have impacted your personal learning opportunities (e.g., family responsibilities, work-related responsibilities):


15. Please describe a learning experience when you were **very** engaged. What qualities do you think made this learning enjoyable for you?


16. Please describe a learning experience when you were **not** engaged. What qualities do you think made this learning less enjoyable for you?


17. To what extent do you think your personal learning experiences impact your classroom teaching and your students?

- [ ] A great deal
- [ ] Considerably
- [ ] Moderately
- [ ] Slightly
- [ ] Not at all

18. Please explain your answer above


---

**Part Three: Follow Up Interview**

19. Would you be willing to participate in a 60-minute interview? The interview will be held at your convenience. It will concern your learning experiences, and how you perceive your personal learning to impact your classroom teaching.

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

If you responded YES, please provide your first name and an e-mail address and/or phone number below:
Interview Questions
Personal Learning in the Lives of Elementary Teachers

The interview questions will emerge from the questionnaire results. The areas of questioning will be: (a) personal learning interests and underlying motivations, (b) personal learning changes across career stages, and (c) reported impact of teacher personal learning on classroom teaching and learning. Sample questions for each area are listed below.

PERSONAL LEARNING INTERESTS AND UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS

1. Please list all of the learning that you have taken part in since you started your career in teaching.

2. Why do you take part in these experiences?

3. Were there any aspects of the learning experience that caused you to struggle?

PERSONAL LEARNING CHANGES ACROSS CAREER STAGES

4. How has your learning changed throughout your career?

5. From the initial data, it appears that (finding from survey here). How does this response relate to your experience?

REPORTED IMPACT OF TEACHER PERSONAL LEARNING ON CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING

6. In what ways do you think your learning outside of the classroom and the profession affects your classroom and your students?

7. Please describe a particular event that happened in your classroom to illustrate the kinds of learning you promote.
## Observation Recording Sheets

### a) ORGINAL LEUVEN SCALE OBSERVATION SHEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Child &amp; Pseudonym:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complexity and creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression and posture</td>
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<td>Persistence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Precision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal utterances</td>
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<td>Satisfaction</td>
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</table>

### b) MODIFIED SCALE FOR OBSERVATION OF TEACHERS

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<th>Description of Teacher &amp; Pseudonym:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Energy</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
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<td>Complexity and creativity</td>
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<td>Reaction time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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<td>Critical Reflection</td>
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<td>Nurturing Behaviours</td>
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MODIFIED SCALE FOR OBSERVATION OF STUDENTS

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<td>M</td>
<td>H</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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