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## TEACHING LIVES: AN ARTS-INFORMED EXPLORATION OF TEACHER EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** With this article we connect the knowledge and experiences of two veteran schoolteachers to present-day paradigms of learning and teaching in schools through narrative and arts-informed research processes. By extracting meaning from narratives of teacher experience and reinterpreting those meanings using musical and visual art media and methods, we hope to engage percipients in a form of *empathetic participation* that may lead to new and/or revitalized conceptions of teaching and

learning, inform current pedagogical practices, and enhance teachers' sense of belonging to an intergenerational community of educators.

**Keywords:** arts-informed research; narrative inquiry; visual art; music; teacher experience; emergent curriculum

## Introduction

Teachers' stories provide accessible and engaging opportunities to gain knowledge of teachers and schools (Garvis & Pendergast, 2012; Preskill, 1998). By considering and engaging with teachers' stories, other teachers can gain understanding, broaden vision, increase interpretive competence, and enrich practical repertoires (Conle, 2003). Our own practice of teaching has been profoundly influenced by the stories that other teachers have told us. When working with pre-service educators, we in turn frequently draw from our own experiences to share what we have learned through stories. We believe that policy makers, students, parents, and the general public can also learn from teachers' stories, gaining insight that has the potential to alter or build on their ways of thinking about education. Guided by the overarching question, *What is the knowledge that experienced teachers have developed over a lifetime of teaching?*, we embarked on an exploration of two teachers' experiences using narrative inquiry and arts-informed research methods.

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Narrative researchers and teacher educators have long recognized the value of the personal practical knowledge that teachers develop through the lived experience of responding to the particular realities of their classroom contexts (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Pulvermacher & Lefstein, 2016), and how that knowledge shapes teachers' personal and professional identities (Fowler, 2006). Contrary to the objectivity prescribed by traditional positivist research paradigms, narrative research does not ignore personal affective and subjective meanings. Rather, individual life stories and perspectives (and the process of re-storying their messages) are viewed as instrumental to the understanding of social phenomena (De Fina, 2009; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

In this article we present a narrative of teaching that demonstrates *emergent curriculum*—that is, a model of teaching and learning where curriculum *emerges* from interactions between students, teachers, and the surrounding environment, thereby benefiting everyone involved (Halls & Wien, 2013; Katz, 1993; Wien, 2008). We view this model in contrast to what is typically practiced today in K-12 public school environments where curriculum is mandated using a top-down approach. Our perception is that teachers today have so many objectives and goals to attain that they have little choice but to prioritize teaching techniques that are efficient. In contrast, our perception of the narrative presented here is that the absence of imposed curriculum allowed the teachers the space and autonomy to develop a curriculum focused on the students themselves.

## Rationale

Our work is predicated on the belief that teachers' personal practical knowledge can be explored, re-storied, and understood further using artistic approaches *beyond* the written word, with the aim of engaging diverse audiences. Drawing on the work of various arts-based researchers (e.g., Blaikie, 2013; McCaffrey & Edwards, 2015), as well as our own artist-educator backgrounds, we make use of visual arts and music in addition to narrative methods to (a) deepen our understandings of a particular re-storied narrative of emergent curriculum and teaching, and (b) communicate to audiences the personal meanings and implications we gained from creating artistic reinterpretations of the narrative data.

We offer a unique contribution with this work by using visual art and music as complementary arts-based research methods. Although arts-based researchers have been active in the realms of the visual arts, literary arts, drama and even dance, Leavy (2015) has pointed out that music “is still underutilized in social research” (p. 140). However, the *potential* of music to enhance research processes is significant (Bolden, 2017). Music has long served as a means of illustrating and communicating understandings across diverse contexts. If utilized to represent research findings, music could “affect audience members in new ways” (Leavy, 2015, p. 127). In the support of narrative, music can significantly influence emotional response – a potential powerfully realized in film and television productions. Within a research context, Xing (2017), for example, used music to poignantly convey the troubled academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with limited spoken English studying at a Canadian university. Xing used musical representations to emphasize identified themes such as frustration and loneliness. By using both music and visual arts to analyze and represent the data at the heart of this research, we bring two complementary artistic approaches to bear. The advantage of using multiple forms of representation is that they

offer the research audience multiple points of entry. Some audiences may more readily find meaning in a visual art representation, while others may find resonance within the music. Audiences may also construct meaning through the consideration of both artistic forms together, and the interactions between them.

## Method

We align our work with an *arts-informed research* approach, defined by Knowles and Cole (2008) as a means of “bringing together the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts” (p. 33). We act as artist-researchers, engaging in “examination of the research question via art production alongside literature reviews and data collection” (Blaikie, 2013, p. 58). By extracting meaning from stories of teacher experience (i.e., narrative inquiry) – acquired using a teacher interview approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and personally reinterpreting those meanings using arts-informed methods, our ultimate goal is to engage interdisciplinary audiences in the kind of *empathetic participation* that the arts have the power to invoke (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In other words, the arts offer opportunities to participate in events and phenomena in ways that “make it possible for us to empathize with the experience of others” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 3). As a result of this emotional understanding, percipients may begin to reconstruct old ways of thinking and behaving (Jackson, 1998).

Similar to McCaffrey and Edwards (2015), we view the coming together of various sources (narrative, visual arts, music) as a repurposed form of triangulation where the aim is not *completeness*, but rather a deepened understanding through artistic processes. Ellingson (2009) proposed the term *crystallization* in lieu of triangulation to more accurately capture the infinite angles, approaches, and dimensions one might consider to fully explore a topic of interest in qualitative research. She also viewed methodology as “existing on a continuum from positivism (i.e., scientific research that claims objectivity) through radical interpretivism (i.e., scholarship as art)” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 5) rather than being confined within traditional art and science boundaries. Our work exists on this continuum, and adopts a crystallized approach to qualitative investigation that transcends commonplace research genres and limitations, but still respects and maintains their usefulness.

**Data Collection.** In the summer of 2014 Ben (second author), following ethics review board approval, conducted a series of interviews/guided conversations (Cole & Knowles, 2001) over a three-week period with two participants. Betty and Lindy<sup>1</sup> were recruited through personal contacts due to their extensive experience teaching in schools. Betty began teaching in 1956 and retired in 1984. Betty’s daughter, Lindy,

taught from 1973 to 2012. Both women taught in publicly funded schools in England – Betty in a rural village, and Lindy in inner city London. Ben held three one-to-one interviews with each participant and two interviews with both participants together. The interviews/guided conversations addressed the overarching questions: *What were the critical moments and experiences that shaped your teaching? What stories need to be told?* (adapted from Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012). These interviews/guided conversations were minimally and flexibly structured in order to allow the participants agency in talking about that which they identified as significant and chose to share (Cole & Knowles, 2001). All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to the participants for verification.

**Analysis and Representation.** Our process of analysing the interview data using a narrative approach and then representing the emergent themes artistically using music and visual art involved five steps, which we will discuss in turn: 1) identifying resonant segments within the interview transcripts; 2) creating a re-storied narrative from these segments; 3) identifying themes and metaphors within the narrative; 4) creating art pieces to represent the themes and metaphors (Tiina created a mixed-media collage which then served as inspiration for Ben’s musical piece), and; 5) soliciting member reflections by sharing artistic representations with participants.

**Narrative analysis.** The first step in our arts-informed process involved identifying segments within the transcripts on which to focus our work. We did not engage in traditional qualitative analysis, (i.e., systematically coding the interview transcripts for emergent themes), but rather sought out stories within the transcripts that interested us as educational researchers, resonated with us as teachers, and inspired us as artists. We engaged in what Polkinghorne (1995) describes as “narrative analysis,” where “researchers collect descriptions of events or episodes and synthesize or reconfigure them by means of a plot into a story or stories (for example . . . a biographic episode)” (p. 12).

One particular interview segment that drew our attention was Betty’s experience of watching her students draw trees. The story captured our interest because it spoke powerfully of the challenges of beginning teaching that we have experienced ourselves, and that we see being re-experienced by the new teachers we have worked with as teacher educators. Polkinghorne (1995) explains that narrative analysis requires the researcher to “configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data” (p. 15). Accordingly, we combined this story with other related interview segments to create a brief re-storied narrative that captured, for us, the essence of a particular aspect of Betty’s and Lindy’s experiences of teaching, and also connected to a larger narrative of teaching that transcends specific times, places, or individuals. At the centre of this re-storied narrative are Betty’s and Lindy’s own words. We also

include “descriptions of the cultural context in which the storied case study takes place” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 17).

**Arts-informed representation of findings.** Arts-informed research emphasizes “involving the arts through the process of inquiry as well as the representation of research accounts” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 33). Having together crafted the narrative and identified within it key themes and metaphors, we then individually embarked on journeys of creating artistic reinterpretations of the data and themes. In order to carry out our artistic work we drew on Tiina’s (first author) background as a practicing visual artist with extensive fine arts training, in addition to her background as a certified arts educator, and Ben’s (second author) background as a musician, composer and arts educator. We have both worked in schools with youth of all ages, and both currently work as teacher educators in Ontario, Canada. Tiina created a metaphorical mixed-media collage, which then served as inspiration for Ben’s musical audio art. When we completed our artistic representations, we solicited member reflections by emailing our mixed media and audio collages to Betty and Lindy and asking them to respond.

## Findings

**Teaching Narrative.** Betty and Lindy began teaching during the progressive era (i.e., the 1960s and early 1970s) of British education. During this time there was a marked shift towards individualized and child-centred education that encouraged spontaneous learning. This shift was supported by the 1967 report by the Central Advisory Council for Education (CACE), entitled “Children and their Primary Schools,” which endorsed “the trend towards individual and active learning and ‘learning by acquaintance’” (CACE, 1967, p. 202), the importance and “intensity of a child’s experience” (p. 201) and urged teachers not to “assume that only what is measurable is valuable” (p. 202).

Betty began teaching in 1956, without any formal teacher training. She taught in schools for twelve years, then went to college to earn her teaching degree at the same time as her daughter, Lindy, from 1971 to 1973. Lindy began her teaching career in London, in 1973, and Betty returned to teaching in a small village in the south of England. Both worked with primary school children, aged 6-9. While the women began teaching in different decades, they described similar experiences. When asked about their early experiences of teaching, Betty said:

I never thought for a moment I’d ever be a teacher. It was such a surprise when someone said to me, “Oh! I could do with you up at my school. Why don’t you write to the divisional education officer?” And I said, “Oh I’m not trained, you see.”

And she said, “Oh it doesn’t matter, there are lots of teachers who are not trained at the moment.” So I wrote to him and eventually got sent over to Winchet Hill.

Lindy described how teachers during this time were thrust into classrooms with very little direction from the government or the school. In addition, both Lindy and Betty felt their college training did little to prepare them for the realities of teaching. Lindy recalled:

And when we got to schools, there was no syllabus. There was no national curriculum, you see. There wasn’t anything laid down in those days. Although we’d had training – Mum mentioned earlier on that she really didn’t feel she was being taught how to teach. And that’s exactly what we all felt. You were absolutely at sea.

The novice teachers had no choice but to make use of whatever materials happened to be available. Betty described how she made use of the books she found in her very first classroom:

There were often these books that we inherited when we got there. And we sort of took these – whether they were geography, or whatever they were, you know, and we would carry on from there . . . And there were some books about the Inuit – the Eskimos, as they were then.

With nothing other than these inherited materials, Lindy and Betty relied on instinct and observation to guide their teaching. Lindy explained: “You have to use your common sense. And you sort of worked it out for yourself what they needed, actually. Which was quite fun, really.”

For Betty, the fun came from seeing what the children brought to the learning context. She talked about observing her pupils as they drew pictures of trees: I would enjoy watching what they did. Some of their drawings were so lovely . . . I noticed that, when they drew trees, all their trees were different. Sometimes you’d get a trunk, and a great round thing that was the top of the tree, and sometimes they would stick out like hands, but they were all so very different. So if you asked every child to draw a tree, you’d have a very interesting arrangement. That was a very fascinating thing. Ask them to draw a tree and see what happens!

In the absence of imposed formal learning expectations, Lindy and Betty created their own curriculum, making use of the resources previous teachers had left behind, drawing



from “common sense,” and their perceptions of both what the children needed and had to offer.

**Narrative Themes.** As we worked with the data to construct this storied narrative, we became aware of and sought to highlight two themes that we identified as significant within the data. The first was the theme of emergent curriculum, with the teacher as curriculum planner. For Betty and Lindy, curriculum seemed to grow from a combination of whatever materials happened to be at hand, the observed needs of the children, and what the children themselves had to offer. As mentioned, this approach to teaching – known by many names such as *activity curriculum*, *experience curriculum*, or *emergent curriculum*, was common during the 1960s and early 70s (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). For Betty and Lindy, their focus on emergent curriculum and child-centred teaching was instinctive – they simply adapted to the environment in place and used what was at hand to develop curriculum in response to perceived student needs and interests.

The second prominent theme in the narrative was the notion of the teacher being “at sea.” In our experience teachers often feel “at sea” when they start out. In our own context of Ontario, Canada, far from an absence of curricular guidelines, there is a very detailed government curriculum that teachers are required to follow, and a plethora of resources to support its implementation. As a result, present-day novice teachers find themselves lost in a different kind of sea – one where they are faced with too many, rather than too few, directives and resources; teachers must navigate through a bewildering array of methods, philosophies, expectations and possibilities.

### **Arts-Informed Representation of Findings.**

**Tiina’s visual representation.** Knowles and Cole (2008) highlight the importance of choosing appropriate media and materials to “illuminate and achieve research purposes” (p. 33). Working with the theme of emergent curriculum and the feeling of being lost at sea, I chose materials and imagery that would reflect these concepts. I made a mixed-media work that included paint, pencil crayons, and collage on cardboard. As these basic art materials and techniques are common to elementary classrooms, I felt they were fitting for a representation of curriculum that grows from available materials. I was inspired to collage using cut-outs from an old guide for teaching writing because Betty’s curriculum grew from books left behind by previous teachers.

My next task was to conceive of imagery that would convey the feeling of being “at sea.” I was also drawn to the phrase “draw a tree and see what happens,” as

encapsulating the essence of emergent curriculum. Taking these ideas into account, I developed the concept of a tree growing out of a “sea” of words and sentences that were taken from the teaching guide (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: “Teaching at Sea,” a mixed-media interpretation of teacher experience



Figure 2: Artwork detail

The clouds are stormy and the colours are dark to emphasize the uncertainty of teaching, then and now. Still, the sea is calm and there is one tree (the emergent curriculum) that has managed to grow from the murky waters and stand on solid ground. The two rocks seem to hold it in place, representing the teachers and students that create and support the curriculum together. Without them, the tree might fall. If you look closely at the ground underneath the tree, the text is in the Inuit language Inuktitut. This was a detail I added when I found an old journal on education in the north. As Betty described finding and using books about the Inuit, I incorporated this detail to connect the artwork more specifically to her particular story of teaching.

***Ben's musical representation.*** It was important for me to keep the teachers' words and voices present at the centre of this analysis process and its representation. Working with digital audio editing software, I cut and pasted from the recorded interviews to construct an audio re-telling of the story. Then I combined this spoken-text narrative with an existing piece of music: Benjamin Britten's sea interlude "Moonlight" (Britten, 1944). (I chose to quote this piece of music in my audio art because it immediately came to mind when I first saw and contemplated Tiina's visual representation. The moody atmosphere of the artwork, and the depiction of the churning sea, matched images and sentiments that Britten's short orchestral piece evoked for me.) I segmented the spoken-text narrative into chunks, and strategically stitched them into the fabric of Britten's music, in such a manner as to enable the music to comment on or accentuate Betty's and Lindy's words.

Next, I chose particular phrases within the spoken narrative to highlight – words that vividly represented or illustrated the themes of being "at sea" and emergent curriculum:

- *You were absolutely at sea*
- *You have to use your common sense*
- *Ask every child to draw a tree...*
- *And then see what happens*

I composed musical motifs (as illustrated in Figure 3) to highlight and represent these words and notions, generating the short melodic gestures from the pitch, rhythm and cadence of the spoken words. I articulated the motifs with computer-generated woodwind instruments (oboe, bassoon, clarinet and flute), and wove them into the fabric of the audio collage.





Phrase	Instrument	Musical Motif
<i>You were absolutely at sea</i>	Bassoon	
<i>You have to use your common sense</i>	Clarinet	
<i>Ask every child to draw a tree...</i>	Clarinet	
<i>And then see what happens</i>	Oboe, Flute	

Figure 3: Themes and corresponding musical motifs

I constructed the musical motifs so they would musically “fit” into the existing texture of Britten’s sea interlude. I introduced the motifs when the associated words were first spoken, sounding underneath the voices, then re-stated the motifs at later points (sometimes modified in pitch), to hearken back to the associated concept or theme. To hear the musical representation, please follow this link, or paste it into a browser:

<https://ualberta.aviaryplatform.com/r/319s17tc9h>

Audio file: At Sea

## Personal Reflections

Through the process of reflecting on the narrative and creating these artworks, we individually developed new understandings of the identified themes and the significance of Betty’s and Lindy’s story. Here we present our personal understandings, as well as the implications we collectively drew from these understandings for education audiences.

## Learning through the Artistic Process.

**Tiina's reflection.** Through this process of creating a visual representation of being “at sea,” I came to understand how teachers’ stories can elicit personal reflections of practice and new affective knowledge. In 2006, arts-informed researcher Susan Walsh described a similar experience engaging in poetic writing in response to themes generated in group art making and discussion with teachers. She explained, “My work with writing as an inquiry process allowed me as researcher/writer to make associations other than those discussed in the group” (p. 982). Reading Betty’s and Lindy’s narrative made me think about my own teaching experiences, and creating the artwork allowed me to better reflect on how I would feel under similar circumstances, to a greater extent than when I simply read the story.

As I created the sea and sky, representative of the teachers’ uncertainty, I realized how powerfully teachers crave and need something to hold on to, to keep from sinking. I was reminded of my first teaching job, and the overwhelming feeling that I did not know what I was doing or where to look for guidance, despite all my training. I then painted that feeling in the sky and sea with dark blues and greys. I also remembered how my students acted as my anchor whenever I felt that way. Their achievements (however big or small) were evidence that the interactions and relationships that occur within the classroom are what really matter, rather than the “sea” of curriculum expectations, hence I covered the curriculum phrases with paint and placed the island overtop.

Reading the story, I recognized the significance that embracing an emergent curriculum might have had for Betty and Lindy, and perhaps how adopting an emergent curriculum may benefit teachers today. As I conceptualized and painted the rocks, representing the teacher and students, I became aware of their crucial dual role in supporting an emergent curriculum and in navigating the “sea” of education. In emergent curriculum models, teachers work alongside students in a process of co-learning and co-constructing knowledge, rather than dictating information (Yusuf, 2010). Curriculum is “drawn out” from the students, not “poured in” (Dewey, 1900/1990). In essence, curriculum cannot exist without both the students’ input and the teachers’ expertise in curating the learning experiences. The tree cannot stand in the sea without a base to grow from.

**Ben's reflection.** As I worked musically with the data I developed new understandings of the meanings the teachers’ words held. Beyond our original analytical focus of teachers “at sea” and emergent curriculum, I noticed that Betty’s experience of teaching was a journey of unplanned adventures and discoveries. I noticed that she

delighted in the personal expression and investment that the children were able to offer. I also noticed that Betty's openness to opportunities and possibilities – and how she was able to recognize and find value within them, enhanced her teaching journey. I wove these new understandings into my audio art, seeking to communicate and represent them musically. In carrying out this artistic work, I learned through feeling. I imagined the feelings that went along with the participant words, and re-presented them with music that for me paralleled those feelings. For example, I positioned a musical climax at Betty's realization that each child had something unique to contribute when given the opportunity, and so actually *felt* the epiphany of that realization.

## Strengths and Limitations

The understandings of teaching that constitute our findings are representative only of our own perceptions of Betty's and Lindy's experiences, and not of teachers' experiences in any general sense. However, the value in this research is in illuminating the unique knowledge developed by individuals and embedded within the stories they share. By focusing on individuals, narrative inquiry honours the notion that "an *n* of 1 can be used to secure knowledge of a process or an outcome that can serve as guide for work in the future" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 170). It follows, then, that an individual's stories can be helpful in building understanding of complex phenomena such as teaching and learning. Similarly, the potential in research through the arts is not in pinning down truths, but in opening up understanding, for art has tremendous capacity to illuminate phenomena in new ways. Validity is assured, according to Barone and Eisner (2012), when "the story rings true. The analysis is cogent and credible. The tale is coherent. The *meanings* are generalizable" (p. 163, italics added). Our aim in creating Tiina's visual mixed-media collage and Ben's audio art from the source material of Betty's and Lindy's narrative was to generate new affective meanings toward teaching and education, for ourselves and others, and to offer windows into teacher experience. Our goal was to achieve the potential of arts-based research "to jar people into seeing and/or thinking differently, feeling more deeply, learning something new, or building understandings across similarities or differences" (Leavy, 2015, p. 9).

A significant benefit of the arts-informed research approach was that through the process of art making we both connected to the participants' stories on a deeply personal level, allowing us to explore "the connections between our lives and the larger contexts in which we live our lives" (Leavy, 2015, p. 9). We felt inspired and energized by Betty's and Lindy's positive attitudes toward open-ended and child-centred teaching and learning (particularly through the art-teaching example of students drawing trees), and in turn frustrated with present-day curricula and demands on teaching that close off emergent opportunities and student-focused approaches. We used these affective

responses to fuel our art making and create representations that brought together and illustrated these conflicting feelings.

With these artistic representations of our research we aim to provide an affective sense of moving from uncertainty to meaning – of the progression from a teacher trying to cope and stay afloat to building authentic and meaningful learning experiences for students. The use of metaphor is key in developing and relaying this understanding, as thinking about teaching experiences in metaphorical terms allows teachers to better understand philosophies and notions of education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Erickson & Pinnegar, 2016). Tiina used the metaphor of teaching as an “at sea” experience, and the curriculum as a tree that grows from materials and context, held in place by the rocks that are teachers and students. Ben also made use of the “at sea” metaphor, emphasizing in his piece the transition from Betty being “at sea” when she began teaching to later finding solid ground in her epiphany of the value of inviting children to bring their own unique experiences to the curriculum through artistic expression. Others may conjure up different images and metaphors from the narrative, since individuals possess unique experiences that underlie their perspectives. Our intent is to open up “multiplicity in meaning making . . . *evoking* meanings rather than denoting them” (Leavy, 2015, p. 10). Regardless of the associations or responses that come to mind, we believe the pieces are effective as long as they elicit some kind of physical, affective, or thought-provoking reaction.

As previously mentioned, when we had completed our artistic representations, we sent them via email to Betty and Lindy to ask for their thoughts. Their responses were not detailed. Regarding the musical representation, Betty responded that it was “not the right choice of music.” Lindy wrote, “I liked the music when the trees were being talked about, as it made you envisage the drawings grow as they evolved. Well done for your efforts.” Neither Betty nor Lindy commented on the visual piece. It is unclear why they responded to the music and not the art. Was it perhaps that they found the music more evocative? It is possible that they felt more closely connected to the musical representation, as it actually incorporated their recorded voices? Perhaps the audio representation was more accessible to them than the visual piece because the music commented directly on the words they spoke in the interviews, while the meaning of the visual piece may not have been apparent to them.

The responses Betty and Lindy provided to our pieces were far from a ringing endorsement of our efforts to illustrate and communicate their experiences. In essence, our work does not seem to have resonated with them. However, we do not view their responses as a negation of the credibility or trustworthiness of the representations we present. As we reflected on Betty’s and Lindy’s responses to our artistic accounts of their experiences, we acknowledged that our representations resulted from our own



aesthetic and artistic responses to their stories and the meanings we found within them. We produced *new* narratives and works of art. Our personalized interpretations of the stories cannot claim to represent the same meanings that the original stories hold for Betty and Lindy; instead, they represent what the stories mean to us.

Traditional research practices aim to remove personal bias and influence. In contrast, as artist-researchers, we recognize that it is impossible to remove ourselves from the research, just as artists cannot remove themselves from their artwork. Our work for this project, and arts-informed research in general, cannot be objective or removed from personal experience. However, we embrace this subjectivity. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) wrote, “experiences are felt . . . one almost never learns and/or experiences anything objectively” (p. 26). Our intention was to subjectively and affectively explore what Betty’s and Lindy’s particular narrative meant to us, and how it made us feel, so that we might, through our art, evoke those feelings and understandings in other teachers, that they might decide for themselves if the stories and our interpretations of them have resonance and ring true.

## Implications and Conclusion

Although the political and cultural climate of the time in which Betty and Lindy taught was different from what many teachers in North America, and even Britain, experience today, there is much we can take from their narrative. In particular, we see value in shifting curricular emphasis from “the prescriptions of outside developers, policy makers, academics, and others to the decisions of teachers” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 147). Currently, overly prescribed curricula and the intensification of teaching are negatively affecting the profession (Clandinin, et al., 2015). Hence, we search for ways to support teachers in moving, like Betty and Lindy, beyond the difficulties to find enjoyment in teaching. If we consider the case of Betty and Lindy, they revelled in the opportunity to create their own curriculum and see what might come of it. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia emergent curriculum model:

Teachers – like children and everyone else – feel the need to grow in their competencies; they want to transform experiences into thoughts, thoughts into reflections, and reflections into new thoughts and actions. They also feel the need to make predictions, to try things out, and then interpret them. (cited in Gandini, 1993, p. 66)

Through emergent curriculum approaches, teachers’ minds are engaged and active, encouraging a sense of professionalism and motivation (Katz, 1993). Furthermore, Hill (2014) posits that by focusing on the concept of “curriculum-as-lived” (i.e., context-



specific learning that focuses on the experiences of teachers and students) as much, if not more, than the “curriculum-as-plan” (i.e., the mandated curriculum), teachers can move away from the role of technical drone and fact-pusher. Instead, they become *transformative intellectuals* (Giroux, 1985), capable of challenging the status quo and creating critical learning environments; artists and composers who create aesthetic experiences and instill a love of learning in students (Simpson, Jackson, & Aycok, 2005); and self-reflective practitioners who engage in life-long learning as much for their own benefit as for their students’ well-being.

Using arts-informed research processes to analyze and represent the interview data allowed us, as teachers and artists, to gain in-depth and affective understandings that will hopefully translate to others through the resulting art pieces. With this in mind, we invite education audiences to initiate conversations with veteran teachers and colleagues and to engage in similar arts-based exploration of pertinent themes and issues. The resulting art products can be exhibited in schools, public art spaces, festivals, and other venues to spark dialogue and inspire resistance to current efficiency models of education and problematic assessment practices.

Betty’s and Lindy’s narrative reminds us that teaching can be meaningful and enjoyable even without a set guide of methods and outcomes. It also reminds us that children have unique expressions to bring to the curriculum table that deserve to be encouraged, appreciated, and celebrated. Our goal is to enable those who engage with this work to consider some of the nuances of these teachers’ stories, and to build their own meanings from them that are resonant and enduring. We hope this work may lead to new or revitalized conceptions of teaching and learning, inform pedagogical practices, enhance teachers’ sense of belonging to an intergenerational community of educators, and thereby make a difference in teaching lives.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Betty's and Lindy's names used with permission.