

2016

'The Classroom is a Place Where I'm Alive:' One Teacher's Reflection on Learning and Life in the Classroom

Susanna M. Steeg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty



Part of the Education Commons

'The classroom is a place where I'm alive:' one teacher's reflection on learning and life in the classroom

Susanna M. Steeg

Doctor of Education Department, George Fox University, Newberg, USA

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study of one teacher's learning life describes how affective considerations influenced her learning and teaching. Classroom observations, interviews, and inquiry conversations informed the learning considerations that infused her first-grade classroom. The resulting descriptive vignettes showcase the various ways this experienced teacher trusted the significance of affect for her teaching and learning life together with children. This allowed her to co-construct a 'life curriculum' alongside students, demonstrating sensitivity to her students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 September 2015
Accepted 20 January 2016

KEYWORDS

In-service teacher learning;
emotion in teaching;
professional development

Inquiries into the nature of teacher learning such as the one encompassed in this study increasingly point to the need to create learning environments for teachers that invite the questions that live in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hammerness et al., 2005) and offer support for examining those questions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Studies of teacher learning can also point the profession to ways that teachers enact their professional identities (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Lasky, 2005) and use affect to inform their teaching and learning (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Schutz, 2014). The aim of this study is to share the nature of an experienced teacher's learning and illustrate how it informed the instructional decisions she made as she invited students into important conversations about life. The study illustrates the outcomes of her affect-aware teaching across a particular interaction in her classroom. Gwen Struble, a first-grade teacher, demonstrated how she 'came alive' as a learner and teacher in a vignette revealing the particular ways that care and thoughtfulness infused her teaching life and learning life.

Theoretical background

Sociocultural learning theory views learning as constructing meaning from experience (Dewey, 1938) in relationships between teachers, students, community, and the world (Hammerness et al., 2005). Yet ongoing study is needed to ascertain the nature of teachers' learning lives and the ways they enact them in their teaching (Borko, 2004; Henze, van Driel

& Verloop, 2009). Examinations such as these hold potential for long-term, embedded learning opportunities that lead to transformed teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of sociocultural theory states that learning is appropriated at the social level first and individually appropriated later (Golombek, 2015; Rogoff, 1995). From this perspective, teachers' views of the world and identities are socially constructed, complex, layered, and under continual reconstruction. In his inquiry into teachers' emotions, Schutz (2014) highlighted an ecological dynamic systems perspective to illustrate how teachers constantly monitor their goals and related achievement as part of their identity formation. This meaning-making process is transactional in nature, making the interactions between teachers and students the sites in which to understand the nature of affect in shaping the instructional decisions teachers make (Adger, Hoyle & Dickinson, 2004; Golombek, 2015).

Teachers recognize that learners must feel 'safe' or 'comfortable' in order to learn (Krashen, 1982; Maslow, 1943) and while seminal works like Noddings (2003) explore the nature of caring in teaching, affect is seldom considered a particular element of learning in an era of accountability. Yet attention to affect and care is essential to teachers' work, despite its marginalization in policy and practice (hooks, 2003; Noddings, 2003; O'Connor, 2008). This study extends these perspectives by demonstrating how one teacher's learning, professional identity, and caring factored into her commitment to enact holistic literacy engagements with her students.

Methodological considerations

This study utilized an interpretive and descriptive case study design (Stake, 2005), informed by ethnographic methods (Wolcott, 2008) to support a nuanced understanding of the multiple interactions informing one teacher's learning and teaching. The research question under study was, 'How does an experienced teacher live out her learning life alongside children?' This question was rich with potential for exploring the nature of teacher learning and was studied within the interactions between teacher and students in a first-grade classroom.

Data collection

Data for this study were generated through three primary means: classroom observations of Gwen's literacy instruction, participant-observation in inquiry group conversations with her and a fellow teacher, and in-depth interviews. Bi-weekly classroom observations of Gwen's literacy instruction totaling over 40 hours provided extensive data. These observations were video-recorded and field-noted, with frequent member checks on emerging findings. Inquiry group conversations took place weekly and enabled participants to construct ideas about learning together, as they reviewed transcripts, discussed the week's events, and answered questions emerging from their practice. A three-interview structure (Seidman, 2005) provided particular insights into Gwen's own perspectives on the nature of her learning. One follow-up interview was conducted with Gwen for the purpose of member-checking and expanding themes.

Data analysis

Analysis was iterative, beginning with field notes and researcher memos, which supported the development of themes and documented researcher positionality (Maxwell, 2004; Peshkin, 1988). A modified analytic induction (Erickson, 1986) involved inductive and deductive analysis through repeated readings, assertion composition, and vignettes. Phase one of analysis included reading interview transcripts several times and identifying text passages related to teacher learning and identity as a learner. Phase two of the research involved vignette construction, which supported a closer analysis of Gwen's teaching and learning life as it unfolded in particular interactions with children. Vignette composition of key moments such as the ones highlighted in this article proved invaluable to presenting findings by displaying small moments that supported prominent themes of teacher learning (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Little literary license was taken with vignettes, which were solely based on recorded conversations and teaching events. Analysis was further supported with an extensive member check, wherein Gwen elaborated on findings and clarified particular elements of her learning life.

Findings: Gwen's teaching life

This article turns now to a vignette to illustrate how Gwen taught out of an ethic of caring and a professional identity informed by her personal experiences. A close look at one particular interaction between a teacher and her students can be helpful in unpacking the larger themes of a reflective teacher's life and priorities (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). The central vignette around which this article is built was constructed from field notes of a single hour in Gwen's classroom. Discussion and clarifying comments are woven throughout the vignette to further describe Gwen's learning and teaching life.

The first-grade classroom was busy with purposeful shuffling as students settled on the rug for morning routine in early September. After reminding students of the procedures for getting into a circle, Gwen turned to see Kaitlin standing before her, holding out her wrist guard. Kaitlin did not say anything, only held it up with the implied request: 'help me put this on.' Gwen seated herself on the floor and moved Kaitlin to sit before her so she could gently maneuver the small arm with the oddly twisted hand into the brace. As she did so, Gwen asked her, 'Should we talk with the class about this today? They're your friends. They would want to know about this.' Kaitlin tipped her face up to meet Gwen's eyes and smiled, saying only 'Yes!' as she nodded.

Gwen looked out at the students, 'Okay, are you settled? It's time to listen and learn. Who is this?' Her hands rested on Kaitlin's slim shoulders as the children replied, 'Kaitlin!'

'Yes. If you're being respectful to Kaitlin, your whole body is listening right now. Speaking of bodies, Kaitlin has a very special body. How many of you have noticed that she has this pink thing on her arm? It matches the black brace that I was wearing on my foot last week.' The students all raised their hands. They had noticed Kaitlin's wrist guard and had heard Mrs. Struble talk about wearing a boot to help heal her broken toe.

In talking with Gwen about this classroom interaction, she explained that she had not pre-planned this particular exchange. Kaitlin's assent to her question was her only preparation for the conversation. Gwen believed in the importance of planning but leaned even more strongly into the organic nature of 'whatever comes up.' Circle time was the perfect opportunity for the conversation that was about to unfold, because it was a routine thoughtfully established to help children connect with one another and establish ways of being (Cefai,

Ferrario, Cavioni, Carter, & Grech, 2013). Different things came up in this loosely structured, yet highly purposeful time. Today, it was a conversation for a classmate with cerebral palsy.

'Everyone hold out your hands in front of you. Look how special they are. We've been talking about our hands, with the idea of hope and using our hands to spread hope, and Kaitlin has very special ones. Have you noticed Kaitlin's special hands? Yes, Brent?'

'She has a hard way to control it,' Brent stated matter-of-factly.

'You know, Brent, that's a very tactful and kind way to say that, instead of saying something that doesn't sound good to our ears. When you look at Kaitlin's hand, it wants to go this way.' Gwen's hands gently held Kaitlin's right hand, which twisted to the right. 'When she was born, she had trouble with air and breathing. And we've talked about how important the air is to the flowers and the trees.'

Kaitlin turned to look up at her teacher in amazement, 'How did you know?'

'Well, I just know a little bit about it. So she didn't get enough of that good, growing air that we need, and this is part of what happened, as a result. See, her muscles want to twist this way and get tight. But this brace helps her arm bend the correct way. Every once in a while she wants to take it off because it gets hot. But don't you think that every minute she wears this that it helps her?' The kids nodded somberly.

Gwen shared later that she had learned from Kaitlin's mother that Kaitlin did not want to wear her brace at school. Since that time, Gwen had purposefully been talking about needing the boot for her own injured foot and subsequently saw a shift in Kaitlin's willingness to wear her brace, 'just like Mrs. Struble.'

Gwen integrated everything; in her own words, 'everything connects!' Where schooling of the body is often reserved for teaching children how to control themselves, Gwen recognized how attuned children are to bodily differences and knew that their insatiable curiosity might lead them to ask inappropriate questions or make assumptions. She used this opportunity to engage students' natural curiosity about difference and tie it to their learning about nature and hope, a larger theme within her teaching for that year. She explained,

As a young child, I was curious about people in wheelchairs. It became important to me to teach children about difference. When I teach this way, I mirror myself, my own concerns and curiosities as a child. My own questions weren't being answered, so I guess I feel these are important things kids wonder about. For me, it means that I am touching on something that is relevant and important because kids do notice about difference. It's important to broach a subject that other people shy away from. It makes me feel like a successful teacher to break that ground a little bit. I want my teaching to be a little deeper, to be about people and life (Interview 12-15).

Gwen constructed her identity as a teacher who 'breaks ground' by refusing to shy away from difficult conversations with young children. Instead, she gave them the words they needed to appropriate big ideas, using concrete examples in children's lives to help them understand and speak about difference in helpful ways.

Gwen continued, 'If you watch me, I'll show you how I help her put it on. See, her thumb goes through here...' The students leaned in, some of them coming up on their knees to see around others.

As her fingers worked, Gwen asked Kaitlin, 'Is there anything else you want to share with the kids?'

'I was really, really tiny,' stated Kaitlin.

'Yeah,' Gwen agreed, 'she was born very early.'

'I was born two and half months early. And my mom's ring went down my arm!'

A murmur rippled around the first-graders as they contemplated this. Gwen helped them, 'That shows you how tiny and special Kaitlin was. I want you to close your eyes and think about it. I want you to imagine a mom's ring going over a baby's arm, past the elbow.'

Gwen had been working on Kaitlin's brace and spoke now to the students, 'Okay, I want you to watch this. I gently turn her hand the way it's supposed to go because I don't want to pull too hard. I slide my finger in here to make sure it's not too tight, and I ask her if it feels just right. This bar helps the hand stretch this direction. Can we all tell Kaitlin how special she is?'

The students chorused, 'You're special, Kaitlin!'

Gwen used imagination and imagery in her efforts to help children be thoughtful about the reality of Kaitlin's experience. The pace of this conversation was slow and unhurried. By physically demonstrating how the brace worked, she demystified it and reclaimed the word 'special' as a term of honor instead of a label. But Gwen did not just leave the conversation at 'you're special, Kaitlin,' because she believed first graders should know about difficult things.

'This thing that happened to her has a name. Do you know what the name is, Kaitlin?'

'Cerebral palsy.'

Gwen looked at the students and said, 'Can you say that?'

'Cerebral palsy,' they chorused.

'And you might know other people someday that have this. But this is why Kaitlin is so special. And we—'

'Am I special too?' queried Chris, an autistic boy who regularly inserted himself into conversations.

'Everyone's special,' Gwen responded swiftly.

Then it was Kaitlin's turn to interrupt, 'I used to have services, but I lost them.'

'I go to OT for services, too!' said Chris, not to be outdone.

'Yes you do. What do you do at OT?' Gwen asked Chris.

'I have a scratch. I got a scratch on the door,' Chris offered.

'I'm sorry about that, Chris. But I want to say something to you,' Gwen inserted. 'Just like Kaitlin has a special thing on her arm, you go to OT and Speech to get help with your talking.'

'I want my scratch to feel better,' Chris responded.

'I know you do. But what do you think about Kaitlin's story?' Gwen asked.

When Chris paused to think, Kaitlin said, 'I can bring my clothes to show the class how tiny I was.'

'Oh, that would be good, Kaitlin. But right now, I think we should say our hopeful poem, because I think it goes with the things we're talking about right now.'

'I hope Kaitlin don't die, Mrs. Struble.'

Gwen chose to ignore Chris's heartfelt yet inappropriate sentiment as his classroom aide got up and quietly escorted him from the room. Chris rejoined the class shortly afterwards and scooted into the circle to sit directly next to Kaitlin.

In this section of the vignette, we see how another child inserted himself into the conversation. Gwen navigated the social challenges of Chris's autism, recognizing and valuing the ways he felt threatened by another student receiving the attention he himself wanted to receive. She acknowledged his connection to OT, making space for him to positively contribute without allowing him to divert the conversation away from the topic at hand. She respectfully and successfully communicated the expectations of listening and considering Kaitlin. And when Chris kindly said that he hoped Kaitlin 'don't die,' Gwen communicated nonverbally with his aide that it was time for him to have a brief break where she knew his

aide could give Chris attention and an explanation about why that was not an appropriate thing to say. The fact that Chris sidled back into the circle at Kaitlin's side just a few minutes later demonstrated that he felt safe and connected to the community and knew he could find a way to be near the social center of attention in appropriate ways.

Gwen commented on how her learner's mindset has her constantly seeking opportunities to teach children how to converse with one another appropriately:

There's so many things that I do in my classroom that are important threads that are embedded in any conversation. Besides the big idea of talking about important things, there are lessons about validating others and knowing everyone's worth, and understanding that diversity is inherent in our human nature. That's the life curriculum, but it's the other things, like, I know how to listen to you, how to take turns, how to address you back in a proper way. I teach my students how to speak and be heard through these different strategies that I model for them, helping them learn how to develop their ideas in the company of their peers, learn new vocabulary and use it in correct contexts, but in a very organic setting, a real setting, and that's why it feeds into a life curriculum (Interview 12-15).

Kaitlin turned to look up into Gwen's face, 'maybe the kids can ask me a couple of questions.'

'I think they do have a couple of questions, but we need to think for a moment, pretend that maybe you have something like this. That's the only way we can think about it seriously, if we put ourselves in others' shoes. In order to do that, your body needs to be really still and you need to think.

Kaitlin called on students with questions and the conversation unfolded. Charlotte wanted to know what she did in therapy. Faith wanted to know why she was born so early and Hannah asked if she felt special because she was different. To each of these questions, Kaitlin answered confidently and Gwen supported the responses to ensure shared understanding.

Ashley asked, 'Did you wear any diapers or anything?'

Kaitlin responded cheerfully, 'Well, I was so tiny they had to put them under me instead of on me!'

'There! You know a lot about it. They had to put them under her, because if they'd tried to wrap the diaper around her, it would have gone around several times,' Gwen explained.

'Yucky,' inserted Jacob from across the room.

'Excuse me? I don't think that's appropriate for this big talk about life,' Gwen responded firmly.

'How did you grow up to be so big?' asked Nicole.

'Well, I had to stay in the hospital for three months. In a box. Not a real, brown box, it's a, do you know how if babies come too early, they put them in a box? And I had to stay in there for three months so I could grow,' Kaitlin explained.

'You know so much about this,' Gwen said. 'Do you want to write a story about it?'

Kaitlin smiled, 'Yes!'

'You know what, class? We could all write about Kaitlin's story. We are good friends of hers and now we know her story.

In this portion of the vignette, it is evident how Gwen held space for students to make suggestions that would guide curricular interactions, by allowing Kaitlin to field questions from her peers. Gwen co-constructed the curriculum as students asked their questions, exhorting them to think carefully about elevating their comments to the level of excellence she was expecting and actively scaffolding within their talk.

Gwen demonstrated her commitment to a 'curriculum of life' wherein the things we read and write about are the things that matter to us (Fletcher, 1996). By encouraging Kaitlin and her classmates to envision her history as fodder for writing, she opened space for meaningful writing engagements and demonstrated that talking about things in our lives is what writers

do (Calkins, Hartman, & White, 2005; Graves, 1983). This co-construction of a life curriculum is evident in Gwen's reflection upon this particular conversation:

When I sit down with the kids and we enter into these conversations I feel I'm just where they are. I view it as a present: 'Let's see if we can open this present together here.' I don't know what the children are going to say and I actually don't know what I'm going to say. It's a process we experience together. If I don't have that to share with the kids, the curriculum becomes routine and mundane. I want kids to see that learning is exciting no matter where they are in their lives. I'm excited about my own learning and I don't want to lose that. You have to maintain that; you can't fake it. When I have that learning going on continuously, I'm a happy person. So that work isn't really work in my life, it's life more than work, because we're experiencing new things together. It's like *what are we going to do together today?* So I find that's the significance for me; it's been one of my touchstones for my vitality in the classroom. I want to hold onto that child-like surprise and wonder (Interview, 12-15).

With these words, Gwen indicates the co-construction of a life curriculum as essential to her life as a teacher, and the lengths to which she goes to make the curriculum reach across big topics such as disability, difference, and joy.

'Okay, I have a question for you all. What do you notice about Kaitlin that's really special besides her arm?' Gwen asked.

'She's pretty,' said Samuel.

'Yes, she is pretty, but besides that.'

'She wears earrings,' said Charlotte.

'She does, that's true. But look at her face.'

'She has eyes,' noted Natalie helpfully.

'She has beautiful eyes! What about her eyes? Look carefully! Look inside her eyes!'

At Gwen's words, some of the students crawled forward slightly, peering intensely into Kaitlin's face as she began to smile and then giggle.

'Look at that face, right now! How many of you are thinking, "oh, Kaitlin—she's happy!" Do you know, sometimes when something difficult happens to people, they are angry about it their whole life, and they go around saying, "Why me?! Why did this happen to me?"' Gwen's voice turned gruff and sad. 'And they do that their whole life.'

At this point, the kids laughed at Gwen's affected voice and the mood turned silly. Gwen immediately sat up straight. 'Um, okay, unless we're serious about this, we can't go on. I really mean what I just said. It can ruin people's lives. Is Kaitlin letting cerebral palsy ruin her life?'

'No,' said the students.

'She smiles and has a joyful spirit and is someone who inspires in our classroom. So if you look at Kaitlin and you think about having a bad day, you just think about how you don't have this,' as she points to Kaitlin's arm. 'But she comes to school with a smile every day. We love your strong spirit, Kaitlin.'

Here, Gwen drives to the heart of the matter. Far from simple sentimentality, Gwen names her own priorities for 'learning that matters' in elucidating the emotion and human spirit that unite us all. Gwen's identity as a learner and teacher is particularly evident here, especially in her words about what it means to her to have conversations like this one with children:

I think it's not so much a teaching identity as a personal identity. I feel that when I have these conversations with children, that yes, I'm teaching, but I don't think of myself as a "teacher." I think of myself as one of them, a peer almost. We get through to each other, we communicate and it feels good and so it's more of a personal identity. I understand them, they understand me, we reached each other. It's like my hopes for them and for our world are able to be realized

within those conversational moments—that's a hope that is realized. I can see it reflected in their eyes and it's like everything comes full circle.

Gwen's words emphasize how her life curriculum led her to avoid taking exclusive responsibility for being a person who cares in her classroom, choosing instead to distribute the caring role across her students. This professional practice encouraged dialogue and student engagement (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006), helping students learn how to care for others.

'Okay,' Gwen went on, 'I know other people have things they want to share, but we need to think about this some more. We're going to tiptoe to our tables and lay our heads down. We're not going to move, and I want you to think about challenges in your life and in others' lives.'

The students went back to their tables and perched their heads on folded arms, quietly situating themselves. As they did this, Gwen put on some music as she moved around the room gathering paper, markers and a small whiteboard, situating everything where students could see it.

'As you think about people with special needs, I want you to consider all the things that having someone like Kaitlin in our lives can teach us.' As the song ended, Gwen wrote 'Special Needs' and the date on the whiteboard. Underneath, she spelled Kaitlin's name, along with Chris's name and the names of the four special needs students in Room 24, the moderate-to-severe disabilities classroom these first graders regularly visited.

'Okay, look up here. I want you to pick one person, and if you know someone different that you want to write for today, you can do that. We're going to write a hope note, like we've been writing for our cancer friends. And you're going to write a letter.'

After twenty minutes of focused writing time had gone by, Gwen perched herself on a low table and invited students to share a golden line from their letters. Many hands went into the air.

Paige read, 'Dear Kaitlin, you have a great smile. I'm glad that your life isn't down like other people and I hope your arm will feel better and your muscle will be fine.'

'Wow, that was very thoughtful,' commented Gwen. 'She's saying that you're an inspiration to her. Austin?'

'Dear Kaitlin, I hope that you feel better soon. I hope you get stronger. P.S. I hope you have hope,' read Austin.

Attuned to the word 'hope,' the students perked up at that word, and Kaitlin said, 'that made me have goose bumps when I heard 'hope' in it!'

Several other children shared their letters, everyone eager. 'Okay, everyone, lovely! You all are learning how to make a difference in your world. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you are too young to make a difference.' Gwen left them with this brief word before directing them to color their pictures. A few minutes later, they lined up for recess, several students taking greater than normal care of Kaitlin's right side.

This was an exquisite collection of moments in Gwen's first-grade classroom. Yet it was only one of many such interactions Gwen co-constructed alongside her students. Her belief that first graders can think big thoughts led her to trust students and trust herself to create a rich place to 'be alive.'

Findings: Gwen's learning life

Gwen lived out her learning life alongside children by taking a holistic and theme-based approach to her literacy goals for students. She co-constructed a life curriculum with students comprised of their own questions and experiences. In reflecting upon why and how she did this, Gwen spoke of remembering her own questions as a child and recalling how they went unanswered. These questions particularly drove her to the discussions of disability

and difference. Not only did she teach out of her childhood recollections, she considered her day-to-day learning as essential for her own teaching life:

For me, I think when I'm in the process of learning, myself, as in my own studies or something I discover about my community, anything like that is inspiring and exciting to me. It's the process! I just can't help but bring that into the classroom with me. I'm an excited person, so it shows on my face and I'm able to say to my kids, 'Guess what I just wondered about?!' If I don't have those things to get down on their level and look them in the eye with that same surprise and wonder, I lose something... I find that I must be inspired and excited about something to teach well—it's vital (Interview, 12-15).

The following vignette, constructed from her final two interviews, illustrates how Gwen appropriated her learning in very personal ways that she lived alongside her students:

I've been thinking about this—the significance of learning to my life and work—it's just a huge part of my life. It's my identity. It's who I am. I see this semester's learning as particularly significant to my personal life too—the themes and things I was drawn to, they're almost a reflection of my changing role as a mother, you know, as my kids grow up and that part of my life changes. These themes are all connected, and I think it almost met a need in my own personal life. A need for some kind of positive-ness, some kind of peacefulness, some kind of hopefulness. I needed to believe and experience that there are good things and I can be a part of them. This learning was an affirmation to who I am. It was very significant to me... I just didn't realize how connected my life and work were until this semester. It's taught me that the classroom is a place where I'm alive. I just feel so sure that when you stop thinking about things and wondering how everything relates—I think you just kind of cease. To me, learning is everything....

Here, Gwen's words highlight not only her perspective on the nature of learning, but her passion for change and growth in her life and classroom. Gwen was constantly transforming her own participation by living out her personal identity as a learner while simultaneously transforming the social environment of her classroom (Rogoff, 1995). This was evident in the moment-to-moment interactions Gwen shared with her students, which she often said were 'completely unplanned,' yet were observed to be integrally connected by careful thought about students' needs. Gwen brought herself into her teaching in ways that conveyed her passion for learning and revealed personal aspects of her life.

In reflecting further on how her learning and teaching during the school year under study were connected to her personal identity, Gwen commented on how her own children growing up and leaving her home reprioritized her desire to better prepare her first graders for life:

Watching my kids go out into the world made me realize there was more I could do to prepare my students for the world. It broadened my view of the enormity of the shaping responsibility. ... I wanted to make sure I was doing everything to send a whole bunch of little ones out into the world well. It's even in my language. I don't say to my first-graders, 'You're going to second grade,' I say 'You're going out into the world.' (Interview 12-15)

The significance of sending children out into the world drove Gwen to teach from a life curriculum, which she conceptualized as teaching about things that matter and making connections between everything. This prioritization of connectedness was central to the nature of her learning. As a personal passion, it was evident in the way she constantly considered her own identity, her students' interests, and the ways those could meaningfully intersect in the ever-shifting moments of teaching.

Discussion and conclusion

This study offers explanations of how an experienced teacher's commitment to her own learning can inform an ethic of caring, one which 'emphasizes receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness, rather than rights and rules' (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 122). This ethic of care in turn fueled Gwen's teaching and learning efforts, such that she identified herself as one of the students participating in the conversations they unwrapped together. Her own excitement for learning oriented the attitudes she adopted around children; she perceived her role as a teacher to be one where she respected student voice and created an emotionally literate classroom climate (Deakin Crick, McCombs, Haddon, Broadfoot, & Tew, 2007).

In answer to the question, 'How does an experienced teacher live out her learning life alongside children?' it is evident that Gwen co-constructed a life curriculum based on students' experiences, needs, and questions – particularly those related to the underrepresented affective domain (O'Connor, 2008; Zembylas, 2004). Gwen was highly attuned to this construction process wherein the real and relevant experiences of children consist of the learning conversations in which everyone participates (Rogoff, 1995). She constructed these learning conversations out of her personal identity and shifting role as a mother, emphasizing the need to create positivity for herself and her students in an era of change (Reio, 2005).

This study is important because it demonstrates how an experienced teacher was aware of the important connections between her personal reflections on learning and the learning she encouraged in her students. It is critical to recognize that Gwen's lived experiences constituted the core of her sense-making efforts. This was a kind of 'internal learning landscape' that influenced what she chose to pursue in her learning and teaching. This study illustrates how affective aspects can shape learning efforts (Krashen, 1982; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002), creating feelings of empowerment, capability, and trust (Golombek, 2015).

The vignettes also illustrate how Gwen demonstrated various kinds of caring – pedagogical, moral, and cultural (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Pedagogical care about children's academic needs was evident in her explanations of difference, particularly related to cerebral palsy, along with the writing instruction she incorporated into this particular circle time (Cefai et al., 2013). Gwen evidenced moral care by inculcating values about how to treat people with differences, and making a difference in their world. And cultural care or attention to classroom norms and expectations were clearly indicated in how she helped children take turns, listen to one another, and put others first (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

According to Reio (2005), 'Risk taking, emotions, and professional vulnerability significantly contribute to teachers' identity formation' (p. 986). The risk that Gwen took to discuss such a deep topic with her seven-year-old students illustrates how committed she was to a personal and professional identity that supported her own emotional well-being and that of her students. As with Zembylas (2004), this single case draws attention to the complexities that can be understood regarding affect in teaching; no intention is made to draw generalizations regarding the role of affect and caring for other teachers, but simply to ascertain characteristics of one teacher's learning life that deserve further consideration. Indeed, further research is needed to determine how teachers demonstrate caring and risk-taking in an era of change (Reio, 2005, p. 988).

While qualitative studies like this might give us only 'glimpses' (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008) of the learning that evidences such strong ties to affect and identity work, they are nevertheless immensely informative (Hammerness, et al., 2005). Studies such as this enable us to catch a

new vision for the multifaceted nature of learning and to appreciate all that teachers do as learners when they follow students.

Acknowledgements

This article could not have been written without the openness and expertise of Dr Gwen Struble, a gifted first-grade teacher in Mesa, Arizona. I am forever grateful to her.

Funding

This research was conducted at Arizona State University. This work was supported by the ASU Graduate Education Program with a student-support grant.

Notes on contributor

Susanna M. Steeg researches teacher learning and inquiry-based teaching practices alongside educators. Her interests lie in literacy-based assessment, technology in teaching, and writing-to-learn.

References

- Adger, C. T., Hoyle, S. M., & Dickinson, D. K. (2004). Locating learning in in-service education for preschool teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, *41*, 867–900.
- Borko, H. (2004). Professional development and teacher learning: Mapping the terrain. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(8), 3–18.
- Calkins, L. M., Hartman, A., & White, Z. (2005). *One to one: The art of conferring with young writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cefai, C., Ferrario, E., Cavioni, V., Carter, A., & Grech, T. (2013). Circle time for social and emotional learning in primary school. *Pastoral Care in Education: An International Journal of Personal, Social, and Emotional Development*, *32*, 116–130. doi:10.1080/02643944.2013.861506.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Richardson, N. (2009). Teacher learning: What matters? *Educational Leadership*, *66*(5), 46–53.
- Deakin Crick, R., McCombs, B., Haddon, A., Broadfoot, P., & Tew, M. (2007). *The ecology of learning: factors contributing to learner-centred classroom cultures. Research Papers in Education* (Vol. 22). Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701497555>
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Education and experience*. New York, NY: Collier.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed.). (pp. 119–161). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Fletcher, R. (1996). *A writer's notebook: Unlocking the writer within you*. New York, NY: Avon.
- Golombek, P. R. (2015). Redrawing the boundaries of language teacher cognition: Language teacher educators' emotion, cognition, and activity. *The Modern Language Journal*, *99*, 470–484.
- Graves, D. H. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hagenauer, G. & Volet, S. E. (2014). 'I don't hide my feelings, even though I try to': Insight into teacher educator emotion display. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *41*, 261–281.
- Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., Bransford, J., Berliner, D., Cochran-Smith, M., McDonald, M., & Zeichner, K. (2005). How teachers learn and develop. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 358–389). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Henze, I., van Driel, J. H., & Verloop, N. (2009). Experienced science teachers' learning in the context of educational innovation. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *60*, 184–199.

- Hoffman-Kipp, P. (2008). Actualizing democracy: The praxis of teacher identity construction. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35, 151–164.
- hooks, b (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Isenbarger, L. & Zembylas, M. (2006). The emotional labour of caring in teaching. *Teaching and teacher education*, 22, 120–134.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 899–916.
- Mahn, H. & John-Steiner, V. (2002). The gift of confidence: A Vygotskian view of emotions. In G. Wells & G. Claxton (Eds.), *Learning for life in the 21st century* (1st ed.). (pp. 46–58). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370–396.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2004). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Noddings, N. (2003). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics & moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- O'Connor, K. E. (2008). 'You choose to care': Teachers, emotions and professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 117–126.
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity: One's own. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), 17–21.
- Reio, T. G. (2005). Emotions as a lens to explore teacher identity and change: A commentary. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 985–993.
- Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In J. V. Wertsch, P. Del Rio, & A. Alvarez (Eds.), *Sociocultural studies of mind*, Vol. 269 (pp. 139–164). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schutz, P. A. (2014). Inquiry on teachers' emotion. *Educational Psychologist*, 49, 1–12.
- Seidman, I. (2005). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Stake, R. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). (pp. 443–466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Writing up qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Zembylas, M. (2004). The emotional characteristics of teaching: An ethnographic study of one teacher. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 185–201.