

## *Who Am I? Who Are You? – Negotiating a Researcher Identity*

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### *Abstract*

This article examines the process of negotiating a researcher identity with teachers and students during an ethnographic case study that explored literacy engagement in a grade two classroom. I consider the tensions presented and the negotiations undertaken during the study and conclude that the rhythm of negotiation is of critical importance to establishing trust in qualitative research.

### *Introduction*

*“You never know what you’re taking on when you agree to something like this...”*  
(Kat, Teacher, Observation Day 30)

The words that begin this article took place mid-way through an ethnographic case study of literacy engagement within a grade two classroom. Inherent within these words is the question that lies at the heart of the article. What does it mean to “take on” a research project? The researcher must make a journey that begins with seeking institutional approval, establishing a consent process and sharing the carefully outlined details of the proposed research project. But what lies beyond this initial understanding and agreement about the process? How do researchers and participants go about building the relationships and participation structures that will meet their needs? In this article, I discuss the “taking on” process as it occurred between my participants and myself as a participant observer. I seek to show that the building of relationships was key to developing my researcher identity. Just as I desired to get to know my participants, I discovered that they too wondered, “Who are you?” This building of relationships is evidenced through a series of participatory identities that took place during the study. As the article will outline, the participatory identities were sometimes surprising and limiting, yet also offered insights that helped me to establish myself as a researcher within the classroom. It was a process in which my participants and I negotiated, in both subtle and overt ways, who I was to be in that context.

### *An Overview of the Study*

Taking a sociocultural approach, the inquiry on which I base these reflections drew on the work of theorists such as Cambourne (1988) and Guthrie (2004), to explore the ways in which literacy engagement was conceptualized and demonstrated by educators and students in a grade two classroom during 2008. The study included over 50 observational days, spanning three and a half months. Seventeen grade two students participated, along with their classroom teacher. Research techniques included: participant observation, informal conversations about literacy activities, student journals and picture-talks. Through this field work I aimed to get to know the teacher and students, as well as their literacy practices and understandings of what constituted

engagement. However, as I reflected on the data, I was struck by another journey of understanding surrounding the negotiation of my own researcher identity. It is this journey on which I reflect in the article.

### *Methodological Issues*

Qualitative researchers are encouraged to situate themselves within a study in order to identify their standpoint (Denzin, 1997; Creswell, 2005). Yet what does the reader need to know? My age? My marital status? My credentials? During the data collection I was 34 years old, unmarried and a former elementary school teacher turned PhD student. I had begun my educational career in a small, private interdenominational school, where I taught for six years before venturing into the world of pre-service and in-service teaching at the university level. In total, I had been working in the educational field for 12 years. Such facts do not say much about me as a researcher. Who am I as storyteller in my study? What lenses do I bring as both a teacher and a neophyte researcher? Where does the line between teacher and researcher become defined, if at all?

As I planned my entry into the classroom site, I recognized my inability to remain a “detached observer,” distant from the activities in the classroom, and selected participant observation as one research technique. I also recognized that the idea of rigor within qualitative research raised methodological questions related to credibility, bias, power and trustworthiness. Moss (2004), for example, has argued that qualitative work is characterized by both interpersonal communication and intersubjectivity. For some, this characterization can lead to greater role identification where “the ethnographer can present both self and other with a single narrative frame that focuses on the process and character of the ethnographic dialogue” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 464-465). The goal is not certainty (Hammersley, 1990) since neither the researcher, nor the reader can assume such an understanding.

Recognizing both self and other takes the ethnographer to a place of self-reflexivity, awareness that the researcher must openly discuss his or her role “in a way that honors and respects the site and participants” (Creswell, 2005, p. 448). This involves negotiation when entering the research site, a promise to leave the site undisturbed and also a deeper consideration of issues such as bias, power and trust. For example, I knew I could not promise an objective study of the reality of engagement within a primary classroom. Rather, I heeded Harding’s (1991) call for researchers to acknowledge assumptions and value perspectives of others. Participant observation allowed me to move back and forth between participation and observation and to develop a rich set of data over time (see Patton, 2002; Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000).

It is not enough to acknowledge bias. Phillips (1997) pointed out that researchers have points of blindness in which researchers “are not always conscious of, or honest about, the reasons underlying our own actions” (p. 102). When assigning themes to observations, Wolcott (1994) notes, “[I]t is I who put the themes there. I did not find them, discover them, or uncover them; I imposed them” (p. 108). Yet, as Geertz (1973) wrote, the need for interpretation is paramount, as it rescues what is “said” from perishing and puts it down for others to read. Though these writings are always fictional, they are not “false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments” (p. 15). Rather, they offer one view of reality. As Frank (1999) explained:

Students will see classrooms one way, teachers another, and ethnographers a third way. In juxtaposing these views, we come to see what is real from a variety of perspectives. To

understand that there is never a completely objective account is to realize multiple perspectives. (p. 4)

Yet ethnographers do not simply present their own views; they seek to directly incorporate the voices of their participants through the rich use of direct quotes. It was important for me to draw upon the words of my participants in order to share their lived experiences in the classroom and illuminate the nature of their engagement in literacy learning.

I was also aware that discussions of *other* require the interrogation of issues of power, for as Sleeter (2001) cautioned, unacknowledged power can lead to unintentional silencing. With this in mind, I understood the need to identify the ways in which power relationships in the classroom related to engagement and knew I would need to remind myself of the power I held as both a researcher and an adult working with children. This issue is also discussed by Edwards and Alldred (1999) who concluded that “underlying much of the discussion of consent for childhood researchers is a concern with issues of power – to treat children as active subjects of research rather than passive objects, to hear their voices, and to respect and empower them” (p. 266). When children are viewed as passive objects, the question of their consent is put aside. However, recognizing children as knowledgeable learners with a voice to share brings into view the need for a shared power.

According to Lather (1990), empowerment in research requires reciprocity, which “implies give-and-take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power” (p. 263). As descriptions and interpretations are negotiated with participants, greater control is given to participants in relation to theory-building. There is a growing body of research aiming to achieve similar goals when working with children (see Soto & Swadener, 2005; Edwards & Alldred, 1999; Grover, 2004; Samuelsson, 2004). In this study, my goal was to invite children into my work as co-researchers (i.e., through the use of their own field notebook). In part, this also heeds the call of The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) to provide greater opportunities for students in light of the principle of “participation”. Despite this goal however, my role would remain that of a storyteller.

### *Building Rapport and Constructing Identities*

The role of interpreter and/or storyteller calls for a sense of trust between researcher and participant. Building trust, however, is not a simple task. In fact, a long-standing concern within ethnography is the perceived danger of identifying too greatly with other cultures or “going native”. For example, Agar’s (1980) description of the “professional stranger” conveyed the expectation that ethnographers should remain distanced from participants. They should “cultivate rapport, not friendship; compassion, not sympathy; respect, not belief; understanding, not identification; admiration, not love” (Tedlock 2000, p. 457). Moss (2004), however, helped to create a view of trustworthiness as an art involving “social action towards a participatory democracy, where multiple voices or multivoicedness is allowed to flourish” (p. 363). Speaking of fidelity in relation to the work of Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), she conveyed the importance of integrity and the need to faithfully share the lived experience of another while also seeking an aesthetic value that will allow the story to be heard by others.

I began my research with a promise to faithfully share the lived experience of the classroom in which I observed, keeping the notion of fidelity first and foremost in my mind. Though I did not realize it at the time, the structure of my study was foundational to my ability to frame trustworthiness as social action. What I learned was that it was not only the importance of

recognizing these methodological concerns that would promote integrity in my work, but the negotiation of the tensions along the way. The process of negotiation created a living research process that was taking place in response to the lived experiences of the participants whose lives and perspectives I sought to understand<sup>1</sup>. Not surprisingly, the process was not without hurdles. There were multiple identities that came into play during my field work in the classroom, some of which were ascribed to me by others and some that I took on in an effort to establish myself as a researcher and to learn more about literacy engagement.

Attempting to define the term “identity” more specifically, I initially felt myself overwhelmed by its complexity and variations. At the same time, I realized that for me, identity referred to the changing interactions that took place, a “trying on” of identities that would help to define who I was as an “other” in this already-formed social context. As such, it was not role-play in which I was engaging, but rather a complex performance. In his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) considers this notion of performance as a metaphor for everyday human interactions. One of the themes within Goffman’s work is the importance of defining the situation prior to the interaction in order to achieve coherency. Due to various circumstances, this was unclear for my participants at the beginning of the study. As a result, the multiple identities described below represent an ongoing effort on the part of my participants to identify who I am within their classroom. At the same time, I was responding to these identities based on the methodological considerations outlined earlier while also attempting to move forward with the research process I had outlined for the study.

To illustrate the multiple identities that occurred and to share the complexity and tensions involved, I draw upon narratives, observational snippets and researcher ponderings. It is my hope that others, especially neophyte researchers such as myself, will find my discussion helpful for their own work with children. The interactions with the teacher are presented first as they often set the stage for the interactions with the students. All names are pseudonyms.

### *Negotiating a Researcher Identity: The Process Unfolds Interactions with the Teacher*

#### *The Student Teacher*

I arrive at the classroom and the vice-principal introduces me to the teacher, Kat. Thinking all is in place, I am somewhat caught off-guard as Kat asks if I am doing my B.Ed. It seems that despite the role of the Letter of Information to introduce the research and myself, she does not know who I am or the work I am hoping to do. Yet, when I ask her if she would like to participate, she volunteers.

#### *The PhD*

Responding to Kat’s question about being a student teacher, I share that I am doing my PhD. Her immediate response: “Well, now I’m intimidated.” Though I assure her there is nothing to be intimidated about, I know that I cannot deny that my very role as a PhD candidate may be intimidating. Later that day, Kat tells a parent that they are going to be my “guinea pigs” (Initial Visit). Soon afterward, when deciding whether to hand out a Valentine Day coloring

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<sup>1</sup> An understanding I credit to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Sharon Rich and to Mary Hamilton’s keynote address at the 2010 LLRC preconference. Hamilton noted that there are often procedures and practices that are carefully put in place to begin the work we do, but when we look at the actualities of how these experiences are lived, there is often much more to the story.

sheet or teach the lesson she had planned, Kat turns to me and says, “You’re the one with the PhD, what should I do?” (Observation Day 1). Kat adds, “Do I have to call you doctor now?” (Observation Day 1). Her words are conveyed in an ongoing joking manner, but I sense insecurity related to my presence in the classroom. Perhaps I too have some insecurity as I am reluctant to describe the term to myself and do not feel as if I deserve any special recognition for my role. I realize I need to demonstrate that I am not there to intimidate, use my participants as “guinea pigs” or dictate practice. Kat may hold this notion of researcher, but it is not the role that I want. So I alter my plans and enter the site more slowly than I had first anticipated.

### *The Helper*

Over time, my identity as the PhD becomes intertwined with a new one, that of helper. Familiar with classroom routines and having the instincts of a teacher, I step in to assist where needed. This assistance assumes both direct and indirect forms, the most striking example occurring one afternoon as Kat demonstrates a lesson on patterns. Anticipating that she would need some materials from the back table, I hand them to Kat to which she responds, “Thank-you Vanna” (Observation Day 7). Just as Vanna assisted Pat in “The Wheel of Fortune,” I had become assistant to Kat, perhaps suggesting my participation had become valuable. Yet, it seemed my role remained elevated, just as with the identity of PhD, especially with comments such as, “Tara-Lynn, I think you were sent by the Gods this year to keep me more organized” (Observation Day 9). While it was not my intention to direct Kat to consider these aspects of her teaching, perhaps whenever anyone is being observed there is occasion to also become self-critical. Interestingly, it is around this time that Kat asks me to consider house-sitting for her over the summer. Ethically, I am unsure of how to respond and I never give a definite answer. What this signals to me though is that trust is beginning to develop. It also makes me wonder about the conclusions we make based on tidbits of information that we collect. The pieces Kat was collecting suggested perhaps I was a younger student in need of her own space, someone away from home as opposed to someone at home.

### *The Researcher*

Glimpses of a researcher identity begin to appear as Kat provides input as to what constitutes engagement, offering comments such as, “How’s that for engagement?” (Observation Day 13). Kat also began to seek out a more defined role for my participation, such as helping her to begin guided reading. Interestingly, Kat couched this role as one of motivator as shown in the phrase, “Okay, we’re doing guided reading this morning. Don’t let me say, oh next time. You’re here to motivate me – that’s why God sent you” (Observation Day 13). I knew Kat had been receiving encouragement from a colleague for some time and while it had not been my intent to motivate her to take on certain practices, I suspect I would also think of things I wanted to do differently if I was being observed. In this example, I see that Kat is considering how to use me as more than a helper but as a researcher with teaching experience. She also suggests it will be a good way for me to get to know the students for my research.

### *The Capable Teacher*

By Day 18, I find myself being given greater responsibility and authority and the identity of capable teacher emerges. In this role I begin to step in where needed with less hesitancy, though always with a mindset of not overtaking the teacher role. Kat occasionally begins to ask my advice about students and I become someone to turn to when a crisis or situation arises, such

as a pressing phone call with a parent on Day 23. Kat also begins to defend my role of teacher to others. To her colleague who wonders whether I know how to mark, Kat responds, “She’s a teacher!” (Observation Day 14). Interestingly, Kat’s colleague seemed to be working through the same process Kat had earlier. Who is this other adult within the teaching space? A student teacher? A volunteer? I remember my frustration this day as a researcher; unsure of my role and feeling more like a volunteer. Yet Kat had come to see me as someone who understood teaching, reflecting the importance of the progression of identities taking place. Of course, this also brought comparisons as to what type of teacher I was. I too was being observed as evidenced by Kat’s questioning of what grades I had taught and the comment, “You’re not as hard-nosed as [the other grade two teacher] and I are!” (Observation Day 16). Though Kat and I shared the profession of teaching, our styles were different, an important reminder for me as a researcher.

### *Conflicting Identities*

Day 25 brings with it a sense of conflicting identities. First, Kat introduces me to her colleague as no longer “the PhD” but “my PhD”. It was no longer a comment couched with intimidation but rather a desired person to have. However, soon afterward, as a student comes to me for help instead of Kat, she comments, “Helloooo, I’m the teacher.” Journal time begins shortly thereafter to which Kat emphasizes, “Time for your books for me, not Tara-Lynn’s book (referring to the student’s research journals).” Writing in my field notes at the time, I reflected, “Though the trust is building, the interaction during journals today suggests an ongoing tension. Kat sometimes places me in the teacher role, which is why the students come to me but today clearly showed that she does not want me to overtake the teacher role – and this is as it should be” (Observation Day 25). I found myself wondering whether I was stepping in too much. Yet, looking back, I see that these tensions were important in terms of building the trust that I reflected upon at the time. To build trust requires these moments of questioning and wondering and determining roles.

### *Teacher/Researcher*

As trust built, I took on a greater researcher role and began to focus on collecting data, always speaking with Kat first and negotiating these times with her. In fact, Kat became a supporter of helping me find spaces for data collection within the daily schedule. She continued to point out examples of engagement, providing me with a glimpse into her understandings. Communication had opened up to the point where she shared, “You never know what you’re taking on when you agree to something like this. You’re totally not judgmental when I’m scattered” (Observation Day 30). Though this comment suggests that Kat had come to understand that I was not there to intimidate her after all, there remained that underlying sense of my role as a rescuer of sorts. Comments such as “You’re a saviour!” (Observation Day 30) conveyed appreciation but also suggested Kat saw my researcher role as something above her teacher role. Yet, in response to a scrapbook I made for the students as a farewell gift Kat commented, “You know the students...your impressions are my impressions” (Observation Day 52). Her tone suggested I had seen the students as she did. We had come to a place in our relationship where she trusted me as both a teacher and a researcher within her classroom. I was not just “participant observer” as I had first proposed where I would join activities as needed but I was “participant teacher/participant observer.”

### *Researcher Friend*

Nearing the end of the study Kat comments, “It will be strange not to have you around” (Observation Day 48). Just as I am anticipating the change of no longer visiting the classroom, I sense that Kat too is feeling the upcoming loss of my presence. As we discuss my departure, Kat shares that she will miss me for several reasons. The first is having someone to count on, and the second is, “Having an adult in the room that I can share things with, an adult that I click with” (Observation Day 52). It is perhaps for these reasons that Kat also began to confide in me on a more personal level, conveying the beginning of a friendship rather than a researcher-participant relationship. For example, there are sections within the transcriptions that became “off the record” type conversations – a result of a shared trust, like confidential conversations between friends that were not meant to be shared with others. Perhaps this also explains why, on the final day, Kat is adamant that it is not good-bye and she will see me again. She holds true to this comment and visits me after an upcoming surgery, bringing “Get Well” cards from the students and “catching up” about the classroom, the students and other things.

### *Interactions with the Students*

#### *Someone’s Mom*

It is my first visit and I wait inside the classroom as the students walk in from recess. There are some glances and a few smiles as they unpack their bags and begin to get settled in their desks for the new school day. Only one boy ventures up to Kat to ask, “Is that the mom of someone in our class?” He is trying to place me within the classroom and someone’s mom seems a reasonable first explanation.

#### *The Student Teacher*

In response to the student’s question above, Kat hesitates and replies, “For now, just think of her as a student teacher” (Initial Visit). Kat’s understanding of my identity therefore filters to the students; though perhaps it is also a sense of not knowing how exactly to describe me. I remember finding this limiting at the time, wishing I could have explained to the students who I was before the consent forms went home. However, the consent process stipulated by ethical protocol did not allow this explanation, and so my identity remained suspended for the moment with the students left guessing about who I was. I felt caught in the ethical process that is intended to protect students but at the same time, limits the way in which we, as researchers, are able to openly share our roles and recognize students as active rather than passive participants (Scheffel, 2009).

#### *The Helper*

As did Kat, the students soon begin to see me as helper – someone who can, for example, answer their questions or edit their work when Kat is busy. Kat facilitates this identity as she directs students my way or asks me to work with them one-on-one, much the way a student teacher would participate within a classroom. One moment that stands out takes place on the morning of Observation Day 4 when Chloe asks if I am going to “take them out.” I soon realize that Kat has mentioned to a few of the students that I will be working with small guided reading groups, fitting of her desire for me to help her with this task she had set for herself. Chloe seems intrigued with this idea, but beyond this sense of intrigue, I am struck by her attempts, in this moment, to make sense of me in her classroom space. First, she asks me my name. Since I have not been formally introduced at this point, the students do not have a name for me, making my role very open-ended to them. Second, there is physicality to her sense-making as she touches

one of my earrings saying it feels funny. It is a small beaded, dangling earring and I cannot help but think it somehow differentiated me from other people in Chloe's life though I was unsure as to how. The previous day, Chloe had felt my scarf as we walked down the hallway and wanted to use the ends as animal reigns. "Was I someone to play with?" I wondered. How did the students view me within their space? They, like Kat, were gathering information to get to know me.

### *The Researcher*

With Kat's growing comfort with my role as researcher, I initiated this same identity with the students as I began to talk about the research project with them. We discuss the concept of research and the use of a tape recorder. While some students initially make visual comparisons to an MP3 player, they understand that it is intended, as Sarah describes, "So that you'll remember what we've said" (Observation Day 23). A student asks if I can play something from the tape and her prompt serves as a student-led segue way into the topic of confidentiality. My goal throughout this discussion is to invite the students to join in the research. I want to begin the process of making my work more transparent to them, not something to be hidden from them. I want to honour them as participants, a topic I discuss in further detail elsewhere (Scheffel, 2009). It is Maddy and not myself who first uses the word "research" when she comments, "In one of those books that you gave us my mom said you're doing research on kids". During the ensuing dialogue, P.J. questions, "So maybe you want to be a teacher when you grow up?" (Observation Day 23) and it is this question that prompts me, during the analysis phase of the study, to uncover the various dimensions related to identity within the field notes. Reflecting on this discussion, I can see that while I am curious about how the students viewed me, I am more focused on conveying an understanding of research and concepts such as confidentiality. Yet questions of my identity were in the forefront of the discussion. P.J.'s question echoes Kat's first impression of me; that of a student teacher, someone still deciding who she would be when she grew up. While I do like the idea of having this option, it also leaves me somewhat perplexed. Does my age limit me in any way, or is it just simply a factor in the negotiation process that I need to be more aware of and perhaps even work harder to overcome? Or, when working with students, is it to my advantage that I am younger, perhaps more inviting, more teacher-like. I am left with these questions to keep pondering and suspect that it will only be something I can answer with time.

### *Significant Adult*

On the morning of my birthday (Day 30), the students present handmade cards that offer insight towards a new identity, that of significant adult. Amongst the "Happy Birthday" wishes are cards addressed, "To a very special person called Tara-Lynn", and "Only for one just one Ms. Tara-Lynn". One card in particular stands out for the way in which it captures a similar essence of the conflicting identities experienced by Kat. This card represents a group effort by three boys and includes the following separate messages: "Thank you for helping me". "Thank you for letting me tock on the recorder". "Thank you for being our studint teacher". It seems that together they have captured me as student teacher, helper and researcher. Despite this conflict, the students' cards as a whole shared that I had become someone significant to them. A journal entry by Alissa further conveyed this identity as she wrote to me about her worries over losing a friendship. Quickly resolved, she followed the first entry with a note to say "they (meaning her and her classmate) were back together (as friends I presumed) and to "write back". That I was

someone she could share these personal thoughts with revealed that I had become a significant adult in her life; someone to confide in and who would listen to her and write back.

### *Significant Adult/Researcher*

Through the use of picture-talk discussions I am separated from the classroom space as a teacher/helper and once again take on a researcher identity that allows me to hear each child's voice. This is the most overt researcher role that I take on throughout the study and what follows is a time of rich data collection. While I did not notice it at the time, I cannot help but wonder whether this richness occurred because of the time spent building the previous identities, in particular that of significant adult. An interaction with Chloe highlights this interconnectedness on Day 37 as she watches me writing field notes and comments that I am writing a lot. Wondering out loud how much room I have left in my book, she begins to flip the pages out of curiosity. In doing so, she notices her name and looks up at me with an expression of happy surprise yet also a sense of wonder. I share my observation with her, and then smiling with an air of satisfied curiosity, she picks up a piece of dried glitter leftover from a butterfly art activity and puts it on my little table, saying, "This is for you" (Observation Day 37). Though I cannot say for sure what Chloe was thinking I would venture to say that this personal example helped her to understand what I was writing in my book. I almost wonder if her desire to give me something was her way of reciprocating my observation. She even checked the next day to make sure I still had the piece of glitter.

### *Someone to Remember*

The final day of observation has come and several moments stand out for the way in which they reflect the student's need for closure. A sense of nostalgia is reflected in one of these moments as Chloe and I finish re-reading the pages in her journal and then clutching it to, she adds, "But I don't have anything to remember you by" (Observation Day 53). At the time I wondered if I had instigated this reaction by asking the students to write about something they wanted me to remember about them. It may also have been that this final reading signaled an end to the study. I had removed the pages at the student's request so they could still keep the journals but the empty pages left them with nothing to remember of our written conversations other than the journal itself. Later that day, Alissa slips a note into my hand at recess time sharing this request: "Ms. tara Lyn can you plece cppy the things I rought" (Observation Day 53). I later ask her if she means the journal pages and she nods saying, "I want to remember what we wrote". I honoured this request and copied the pages for her to keep. As in the children's storybook, *Something to Remember me By: An Illustrated Story for Young and Old* by Susan Bosak (1997), these instances revealed that I had become someone to remember when it was time to say good-bye. A memory scrapbook further served to celebrate what I remembered of each of them, something that was as therapeutic for myself as it was special to them.

### *The Rhythm of Negotiation*

At the onset of the study, I sought to work alongside my participants as a qualitative researcher, aware of issues related to credibility, bias, power and trustworthiness. Looking back, I ask myself if I achieved this. Straddling the border between identities, I have learned that the greatest negotiation for me was one of balancing my roles as a teacher and researcher. Perhaps this explains why at the same time that clarification was needed, I resisted performing the identity of researcher too early, wanting to build trust with Kat as a colleague. All the while, we

were learning about each other. Kat was “taking the time to try and get to know me . . . as I also tried to get to know her” (Observation Day 23). As such, it was not until entry was negotiated to a point of beginning trust that I was able to move my researcher identity forward by introducing the concept of research to the students.

I am reminded here of Raphael’s (1985) description of the rhythms of the school year. Sharing the case studies of sixteen teachers across various points in their careers, he noted that patterns of familiarity and routine are built prior to the winter holidays where the “tenor and complexion” of the class is established (p. 97). I offer that the same is true of researchers drawing upon ethnographic work. A rhythm needs to be established, a sense of familiarity built so that the researcher can become part of the “tenor and complexion” of the class. Establishing that rhythm, I negotiated multiple participatory identities, both with the teacher and the students. The process of negotiation, in my case, proceeded in a series of phases:

- Balancing a desire to interact with and help students with the role of waiting for an invitation to participate.
- Building trust by getting to know the teacher and students while also allowing them to get to know me.
- Connecting with the students on a personal level but always with the awareness that the details collected would inform the quality and depth of research.
- Establishing myself as a researcher while also demonstrating my knowledge of teaching in order to become part of the classroom and school community.
- Finding ways to say goodbye that honoured the personal connections formed while also pondering more deeply the effect of my presence as a researcher.

The moments I have shared in this article honour the process of reciprocity and aim to represent my participants as relational beings who cannot be expected to just blindly accept someone into their space without questions and wonderings. They recognize that the researcher, too, is a relational being. Though I had prepared to do qualitative work on engagement, my interactions were often formed in response to those of the teacher and students as we negotiated the context of the classroom. Harkening back to Moss (2004), the study was characterized by the interpersonal communication that took place between the participants and myself as we negotiated identity together.

#### *In Conclusion*

I do still wonder if Kat really knew what she had “taken on” by inviting me into her teaching space. In her initial understanding of my role as one of student teacher, it may be that she was more comfortable with the role of associate teacher rather than research participant, a role open-ended and undefined. Thinking about the final identity of “Researcher Friend,” I cannot help but ask myself about the question of power in this relationship. Is it really accurate to call our relationship a friendship when I am a researcher writing about Kat and her students? The “off the record” conversations are an example of the accountability that comes with getting to know someone on a personal as well as professional level. It is this same sense that made me worry about betraying Kat’s confidence as I shared my observations about literacy engagement. Kat viewed all of the transcripts of our conversations but I wondered how she would react to the portraits of her students that brought together the data as a whole (e.g. the parent and student journals, the picture-talks, etc.) Would she still feel that I was able to see the students as she saw

them? Where would this path of friendship lead? Perhaps it is questions such as these that lead researchers such as Tedlock (2000) to write of the need to “cultivate rapport, not friendship” (p. 457). I remained hopeful, however, that Kat would see integrity in the stories I told, both here and elsewhere, as well as a faithful sharing of her lived experience within this classroom. This was the goal of fidelity (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) that I had put forth at the onset of the study. As with all relationships, however, things change, friends move and they grow apart. I unexpectedly moved provinces away at the completion of the study and while we did share the occasional email afterwards, the friendship did not continue in the same way it ended at the study.

Reciprocity involves give-and-take, “a mutual negotiation of meaning and power” (Lather, 1990, p. 263). I discovered that reciprocity takes time, sensitivity to comments and gestures, along with ongoing self-reflection to negotiate trust with participants. Though I may never repeat the same journey, I have learned to find greater comfort in the tensions, worrying less that these tensions suggest failure on the part of the researcher but more so, that they signal a journey towards social action that recognizes this very negotiation process as working towards establishing a rhythm towards building trustworthiness that is unique to the individuals and context involved. While it is not likely that every new researcher will experience the rhythm of negotiation I outlined above, I am hopeful that by sharing my experience, others beginning their work will be prompted to consider the question of “Who Am I?” as they seek to establish their own researcher identities.

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