

## Borderlands of Possibility: Exploring the Construction of Professional Identity with Intern Teachers

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Author Note

I worked on this research throughout my doctoral program at the University of Alberta, from 2011 – 2015. This paper extracts the essence of my dissertation. During that time, I worked as the coordinator of teacher education at Medicine Hat College, but I am no longer affiliated with either the University of Alberta or Medicine Hat College.

### Abstract

Students enrolled in Bachelor of Education degree programs engage in academic study and field experiences that both validate and challenge their existing understandings of who they are and who they are becoming: their professional identity. This interpretive case study explored the ways in which four intern teachers constructed professional understandings during the 15 weeks of their culminating field experience: a borderland space. Ecologically defined as an *ecotone*, this time in between—of being a student and becoming a teacher—is a zone of transition, a crossroads of being and becoming. Using a series of conversational interviews where the researcher and the participants explored the experience of living on the borderland, this study revealed the challenges of constructing a professional identity as well as the ways in which these intern teachers gradually assumed the subject position: teacher. Four essential aspects of this experience were distilled from the findings of this inquiry and arranged into a conceptual framework to assist teacher educators as they craft curriculum capable of engaging student teachers in the consideration of who they are becoming as teachers. By contributing to our growing understanding of the ways in which preservice teachers view themselves as emerging professionals, this inquiry suggests deeper investigation of the mentor-mentee relationship is needed in order to better support student teachers on the borderlands of their final field experience.

*Keywords:* professional identity; borderland space; intern teachers; field experience; interpretive case study



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### Glimpsing Borderlands

Borderlands are ambiguous and often-unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road. Borderlands are places where stories take unpredictable turns and rarely end as expected.<sup>1</sup> (Hamalainen & Truett, 2011, p. 338)

For some time now, I have been intrigued by the notion of borderlands, of in-between spaces that invite uncertainty and promise possibility. My attention was drawn to the existence of these spaces geographically early in my doctoral studies as I made a weekly journey from the southeastern corner of Alberta toward Edmonton over roads thinly travelled. Oftentimes, I found myself the solitary vehicle on these southern narrow-shouldered highways and there seemed little upon which to remark—except perhaps the wind and the loneliness of the setting—although occasionally herds of pronghorn antelope could be glimpsed, well camouflaged against their prairie backdrop. Yet, as I paid more attention to the environment around me, I began to notice subtle variations, shifting the landscape slightly as I drove northward.

I was not entirely unacquainted with the geography of my province: For many years I taught Grade 4 and the activity that began our exploration of Alberta was the identification of the environmental regions and their location on our maps. Together we divided up the territory, carefully delineating the regions with thick black lines and colored each—beginning with the grasslands, our home—always bright yellow. Five distinct regions make up our province and when looking at our maps it was as if, in a blink of an eye, the grasslands are replaced by the parkland with its aspen trees and marshy areas, which in turn, becomes the boreal forest stretching all the way to the Northwest Territories. However, this was not what I observed as I made my way toward the top of the province every week.

Instead, I saw landscapes not ecologically defined where foliage of all kinds exists alongside each other. At no one point do the grasslands definitively give themselves over to the parkland; in fact, it is a struggle. The regions of Alberta survive in tension in these spaces, existing side by side, or perhaps one on top of the other. I became captivated by the notion of these borderlands: rich, shifting spaces of tension that invite ambiguity and struggle. The more I considered the nature of their existence, the more convinced I became that within these spaces lay a thriving quality of being.

From an ecological point of view, these liminal spaces are called *ecotones*.<sup>2</sup> Defined as a transitional zone between two different ecosystems, an ecotone is “the border area where two patches meet that have different ecological composition [and that] contain elements of both bordering communities as well as organisms which are characteristic and restricted to the ecotone” (Graves, 2011). In addition, because they are not characterized by sharply delineated borders, Banks-Leite and Ewers (2009) maintain the job of locating and describing these boundaries is a complex one given ever-changing environmental factors affecting the width and composition of these dynamic transitional areas. Two characteristics from the ecological notion of ecotones informed and supported my thinking as I considered the construction of teacher identity.

First, these zones of transition emerge from within a particular set of circumstances. They can begin abruptly or unfold gradually; they can also vary greatly in width. Boundaries take on different forms depending on how they are created. The two main causes for the existence of ecotones are naturally occurring environmental change and anthropogenic modification to natural habitats: “As habitats are converted from natural to human land uses, anthropogenic boundaries have been created in almost all natural ecosystems. Common examples of anthropogenic boundaries are those between natural grasslands and croplands, croplands and forests” (Banks-Leite & Ewers, 2009, p. 2). While these in-between spaces may develop naturally over time, what I glimpsed and named borderland spaces were primarily the result of intentional human interaction with the environment.

The second characteristic of ecological borderlands informing this inquiry relates to how neighboring ecosystems experience the flow of organisms, materials, and energy across the shared boundary allowing, typically, one ecosystem to make a significant contribution to the development and maintenance of the other. Ecotones often have a greater number of species as well as larger population densities than the communities on either side due to the interaction of one neighboring area on the other. This tendency for biodiversity within the ecotone is defined as the “edge effect” (Graves, 2011, p. 5). Occasionally, the flow of resources goes both ways, thereby presenting environmental conditions able to support “edge species” (Banks-Leite & Ewers, 2009, p. 6). Unable to thrive in either of the two bordering communities, these edge species are uniquely suited for this in-between habitat. Not only does this zone of transition support the existence of abundant plant and animal life from the bordering ecosystems, it also nurtures unique forms of life within its borderland space. The ecotone is, then, a crossroads: a borderland rich with possibility, thriving with being.

From a metaphorical point of view, now named and examined more closely, these ecological in-between spaces glimpsed along my journeys northward offered support for this inquiry exploring the construction of teacher identity with intern teachers. First, these in-between spaces are not uniform: some begin abruptly, others unfold gradually, and the width and depth of each ecotone depends upon the ecological context in which it develops. So it is with preservice teachers during their internship: each brings his or her own past experiences of being a student, of being a student teacher in previous practica, to a classroom environment that is singular. It is a zone of transition shaped by experience and current context.

Second, as with an ecotone, what lives in the borderlands is in a state of *becoming*. As organisms, materials, and energy flow reciprocally from one ecosystem to another this rich, shifting space of tension invites ambiguity and struggle, new life and unique prospects. So it is with preservice teachers during their internship: they are neither fully a student nor yet a teacher. They are at a crossroads, within a borderland. They are becoming. Taken together, these understandings, provoked by my early observations of the landscape slipping by on my weekly journeys northward and informed later by the ecological concept of an ecotone, offered a metaphorical framework for this inquiry into the construction of teacher identity during the weeks of internship that invite uncertainty and promise possibility.

### **Emerging From My Borderland Experience**

To survive the Borderlands  
you must live *sin fronteras*<sup>3</sup>

be a crossroads. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 195)

Once I began to think metaphorically about the notion of borderlands as the transition from one way of being to another, I recognized numerous experiences over the past three decades of my professional life characterized by tension and ambiguity. Rarely, however, had I viewed them as places of possibility; mostly I saw them as times of struggle; occasionally I had been overwhelmed and made still by their circumstances. Anzaldúa (1987) suggests these in-between spaces, *los intersticios*, are a constant state of transition (p. 3) and in order to thrive in the borderlands an individual must *be* a crossroads willing to develop a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity (p. 79). This notion challenged my well-worn view and prompted me to think in other ways as I struggled to make sense of the experiences that constitute my life.

Carr (1986) argues we are composing and constantly revising the story of our lives. From the vantage point of this moment, we look both to the past and to the future as we engage in the constant task of constructing and re-constructing a life that hangs together, that makes sense. From within this struggle to bring unity and coherence emerge categories of meaning that are central for understanding the course of a life because they encompass and order the things we value and the purposes we pursue (p. 77). For me, the notion of borderland spaces assisted my struggle to bring unity and coherence to the story of my life and, in particular, to making sense of the significance, value, and meaning of my own student teaching experience three decades ago.

So powerful was this experience that as I think back on the circumstances of those final months of my teacher education program I am overcome by emotions of all kinds: excitement, regret, sadness, and embarrassment. As a capable student entering her final field experience, I knew a great deal about the nature of children, pedagogy, and curriculum; my knowing, however, was not sufficient to support the successful completion of this practicum and at the centre of the turmoil lay thoughts that insidiously undermined who I understood myself to be. While clinging to the notion of knowing *about* teaching, I questioned deeply whether I would *be* a teacher. These remnants of experience linger in me.

The recollection of being so very alone and in such a fragile place shaped my own work as a mentor teacher during the years I welcomed student teachers to my classroom. More recently, as a teacher educator and program coordinator in a community college in southeastern Alberta, I had opportunity to come alongside student teachers in circumstances similar to my own. In those moments, their uncertainty and turmoil transcended the decades to remind me of what it is like to be in this tenuous place. It is always an emotional experience as we talk about the challenges and decisions ahead, in large part because these student teachers view their current struggles, much as I did three decades ago, as failure: the failure to *be* a teacher. With a renewed understanding of what it means to struggle in an uncertain space, to live on the borderlands of becoming, I recognize the significance of my experience in directing my professional life as a teacher educator and provoking my interest in the construction of professional identity with preservice teachers. This inquiry, emerging from deep within my own experience, explored these borderlands with four intern teachers completing their final field experience.

### **Exploring the Borderlands**

Consciously we teach what we know; unconsciously we teach who we are. (Hamachek, 1999, p. 209)

Students enrolled in Bachelor of Education programs engage in coursework and field experiences that both validate and challenge their existing understandings of who they are and who they are becoming. Often unaware of the essential role these self-understandings assume in shaping classroom learning, they are focused on first understanding the mandated programs of study and then creating engaging learning experiences to meet these expectations. Unquestionably, examining how children learn, being knowledgeable about curricula, and recognizing appropriate teaching strategies is necessary preparation for preservice teachers; yet Hamachek (1999) states that “teachers teach not only a curriculum of study, they also become part of it” (p. 208).

Aoki (2005b) provokes a deeper appreciation for the relationship between teachers and curriculum by suggesting we find ourselves “indwelling in a zone between two curriculum worlds: the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experience” (p. 159). This struggle between what a teacher ought to *do*, as defined by curriculum, tugs and pulls against who the teacher *is* as he or she lives within the classroom prompting us to “see and hear who we *are* as teachers” (Aoki, 2005a, p. 197). Ultimately, according to Aoki (2005b), “teaching is fundamentally a mode of being” (p. 160). Both Hamachek (1999) and Aoki (2005a, 2005b) maintain that the content of curriculum cannot be viewed apart from who a teacher *is* within the context of the classroom. Preservice teachers, occupied with lesson and unit planning to meet coursework expectations and then later with curricular organization and classroom management during field experiences, may not fully appreciate this understanding. As teacher educators, we are compelled to engage our students in consideration of who they are becoming as teachers: their mode of being (Aoki, 2005b).

### **Inquiry Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways in which preservice teachers construct understandings of who they are becoming on the borderlands of their final field experience. Two essential questions directed this inquiry:

- In what ways do preservice teachers construct an emerging professional identity during their teacher education program?
- What prompts and nurtures, confronts and challenges understandings of professional identity in the lives of preservice teachers?

These questions shaped the prompts offered to participants in a Pre-Interview Activity (Ellis, 2006), informed the compilation of interview questions, and guided preparation for additional dialogue with David, Grace, Laura, and Mark,<sup>4</sup> four intern teachers completing Professional Semester III, at the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada in an elementary classroom during the winter of 2014.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This inquiry emerges from a constructivist paradigm. Each person actively constructs meaning and understandings of their experience of the world from within a social and cultural context (Crotty, 1998). Packer and Goicoechea (2000) maintain that while the constructivist paradigm is often articulated exclusively in terms of its epistemological claims, a hidden non-dualist ontology is at work within the sociocultural perspective such that learning must be

thought of as ontological transformation: “What constructivists call learning is only part of a larger process of human change and transformation” (p. 239). This non-dualist ontology places me in the midst as I actively seek and construct meaning based on interaction with my surroundings and with others in community. And in this process I am transformed.

Embedded in these essential ideas related to epistemology and ontology, this inquiry was more specifically shaped by two sets of theoretical understandings that offered a comprehensive framework for exploring the borderland between being a student and becoming a teacher. I see these understandings as strands, drawn together and entwined. First, we make sense of our lives in and through the stories we tell. Who we are is constituted in these narratives told and retold of experience interpreted and reinterpreted (Bruner, 2004; Kerby, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988). As we talked about stories of teachers and teaching, I asked the four participants to consider the ways in which these narratives informed their current experience of being an intern teacher. Teacher preparation programs are unique in that they seek to educate individuals already possessing understandings and experiences of the school environment. It was important, then, to explore how experiences of being a student in the elementary and secondary grades, as well as during university coursework, influenced who they were as intern teachers. Once told, we examined the ways in which these stories shaped both their journey to be a teacher and their emerging understandings of professional identity.

Second, these stories—of who we are and who we are becoming—are nurtured within the socio-cultural historical context in which we live (Bruner, 2004; Stetsenko, 2004). Our social context plays an essential role in our transformation from someone separate and apart to someone who is an integral part of a community. Vygotsky (1978) outlines how the influence of a more-skilled peer supports the process of internalization and suggests every function of an individual’s cultural development appears, initially, on the social level and then later within the individual. These ideas offered particular direction as we looked closely at the opportunity for interns to work alongside individuals considered more-skilled colleagues as well as the manner in which educational communities invite and support full membership, not as a student as in past practica, but now as a teacher: an integral member of the established community.

Packer and Greco-Brooks (1999) argue that school is a site for the production of persons; this understanding supports the notion that teacher education is the site for the production of teachers both epistemologically through the assembling of knowledge about teaching, and ontologically through the construction of a professional identity. School, Packer (2001) argues, “involves ontological change, change in the kind of person a child becomes” (p. 131) and this is no less true for preservice teachers as they craft their unfolding story within their particular social, cultural, and historical context on the borderlands of their final field experience.

### **Mapping the Landscape of Teacher Identity Construction**

This time of transition—from student to teacher—was explored and reported by Britzman in her seminal text, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach* (2003). Considered a “classic in teacher education” (Segall, 2006, p. 181), her volume chronicles the journey of two preservice teachers through their final practicum during the 1980s. Offering a glimpse into the tensions that shape the transition from formal teacher education coursework into the final field experience from the intensely personal point of view of the students themselves, Britzman (2003) observes: “Learning to teach—like teaching itself—is always the process of

becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become” (p. 31). Although completed over three decades ago, this study (1986; 2003) continues to provoke consideration of what we may take for granted—the pervasive and unexamined discourse that shrouds neglected understandings—as well as an invitation to engage student teachers in thinking about who they are and who they are becoming.

In the years following the publication of this volume, teacher professional identity became the focus of increasingly intensive scrutiny. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), directing their attention to relevant literature emerging from 1988-2000, explain that “it was in this period that teachers’ professional identity emerged as a research area” (p. 108). Korthagen (2004) supports this assertion maintaining that while an enormous amount of research has been carried out over the past century in a variety of disciplines regarding the terms *identity* and *self*, only recently is attention being directed to a more comprehensive and substantial understanding of the term *teacher identity* (p. 82).

Building on the view articulated by Erickson (1968) and Mead (1934) locating identity not as something possessed but as developed over the course of a life, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004)’s review of existing literature prompted them to draw together the following four features as essential for understanding professional identity: first, professional identity is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences; second, both person and context are involved in the construction of identity; third, a teacher’s professional identity consists of sub-identities that more or less harmonize; and fourth, agency is an important element of professional identity and that teachers have to be active in this process (p. 122). These four understandings helped focus my thinking about identity, in general, and about teacher professional identity, specifically.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) further directed this study by identifying teacher education programs as opportunities for identity construction that had been mostly overlooked and thus, an area worthy of attention. They state, “Gaining a more complete understanding of identity generally and teacher identity in particular could enhance the ways in which teacher education programs are conceived” (p. 176). In numerous studies Beauchamp and Thomas (2009, 2010, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2007, 2011) demonstrate how teacher education programs are “the ideal starting point for instilling not only an awareness of the need to develop an identity, but also a strong sense of the ongoing shifts that will occur in that identity” (2009, p. 186).

Additional scholars have identified the need for teacher education programs to acknowledge this as a critical time for identity construction both in the coursework undertaken as part of degree completion and in the field experiences designed to invite consideration of becoming. McLean (1999) suggests the development of new teacher education pedagogy reflecting our emerging understandings of self is on-going and explores the use of stories in education programs arguing that “it is not our concrete experiences that shape our sense of identity, but the stories we tell ourselves about those experiences” (p. 78). Korthagen (2004) poses two questions related to teacher education: What are the essential qualities of a good teacher and how can we help people to become good teachers? Together these questions focus attention on preservice teacher identity and lead him to suggest a framework for reflection and development that could be incorporated in teacher education programs. Sachs (2005) observes that teacher education and teacher educators have a central role in the development of new kinds

of teacher professionalism and a professional identity she identifies as the “activist teacher” (p. 20). Thomas and Beauchamp (2007) argue that “developing a strong sense of professional identity as a teacher may be crucial to the well-being of new members of the profession” (p. 229) and report on research they conducted with 21 participants interviewed during an in-between time: after graduation but before beginning to teach. They observe that “while the participants were able to describe with accuracy the individual tasks and roles of a teacher, they appear to be unable to articulate a clear sense of what it is to be a teacher” (p. 240) and from this they draw a number of insights for teacher education programs.

Within this growing body of research four themes emerged specifically informing this inquiry: the construction of a professional identity takes place over time (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Flores & Day, 2006; Trent, 2011), from within a social and discursive context (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Miller Marsh, 2002), is enhanced through professional reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010; Freese, 2006; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010; Walkington, 2005; Urzua & Vasquez, 2008), and shaped by sharing stories of learning and teaching (Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Lofstrom, 2012; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Soreide, 2006; Watson, 2006). These four themes contributed to the conceptual framework directing my work with intern teachers.

This landscape of literature supports the value of exploring the construction of professional identity during teacher education programs, specifically during field experiences. Metaphorically conceived as borderland spaces, the construction of professional identity during these times of transition is influenced by the context in which we find ourselves, both personally and professionally, and the discourses that shape our lives. Through professional reflection and sharing narratives of experience, student teachers are supported as they work to understand who they are becoming as teachers.

## **Methodology**

Three assumptions emerging from the constructivist paradigm guided this interpretive inquiry. First, researchers explore human experience in its natural setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Second, by attending to how parts of an experience come together to form a whole the researcher and the participant together construct meaning and make sense of experience in the world. As our understandings of, and for, our lives emerge from within the context of our communities, it follows that our constructed meanings are open to enduring change and refinement (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Finally, the researcher is the key instrument in qualitative inquiry, in not only data gathering, but also more essentially, in reflecting upon how personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping both the interpretations and the direction of the study (Cresswell, 2014). This collaborative, interpretive methodology was well suited for exploring the questions that shaped this study.

**Exploring the borderland as a case study.** Three characteristics of case study research made it an appropriate design for this inquiry. First, this study was “a bounded system” (Stake, 2000, p. 436). Structured with an exclusive focus on intern teachers in Professional Semester III, a 15-week culminating field experience, student teachers began in their classrooms in the first week of January and completed in the middle of April 2014. Second, the case study offers the opportunity to provide a detailed re-creation of contexts, meanings, and intentions. Described as “thick description” (Stake, 2000, p. 439), this re-creation of the case particularities makes it

possible for readers to vicariously experience specific circumstances and happenings. Finally, case studies are heuristic; they bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known (Merriam, 1998). These characteristics of case study methodology informed this research.

**Participants and their contexts.** Students in their final year of teacher education at the University of Lethbridge were invited to participate in this inquiry with data gathering taking place during their culminating practicum in an elementary classroom from January to April 2014. This field experience, Professional Semester III (PS III), is considered unique in the province of Alberta and offers preservice teachers the opportunity to engage in a full-term internship that includes both teaching and professional study (University of Lethbridge, 2009). Designed to build upon the academic and practicum components completed during previous years of study this final field experience includes half-time teaching as well as the completion of a professional development project.

In addition to acting as the bridge between the more formal aspects of their academic study and the official beginning of their teaching careers, the PS III internship is a borderland space that situated these interns as being both students and teachers. Beauchamp and Thomas (2011) argue this time of initial practice presents a unique context:

Although student teachers may have a developing notion of who they are as teachers as they move through teacher education programs, the shift from the protected environment of such programs into initial practice in schools can be destabilizing and is a period of identity change worthy of investigation. (p. 6)

As the culmination of their teacher education program, this specific context is more than simply a transition from one way of being to another, from being a student to being a teacher; rather, it is a rich time in-between, a liminal space, that invited consideration of diverse ways of being and, as such, was particularly well-suited for this interpretive case study.

**Data gathering.** Conversational interviews were the primary means of gathering data for analysis and interpretation. Carson (1986) observes the process of interviewing is “inherently conversational” (p. 76) and that words have a *maieutic* quality: They become like midwives helping to bring forth thoughts and ideas the speaker has yet to overtly articulate. Weber (1986) suggests that a “shared abode” (p. 86) is created during moments of conversation. This notion encouraged me to focus on building relationships of trust with the four participants and to think about how the collaborative experience of sense-making has the generative power to open up a resting place, an abode, for the new understandings constructed together.

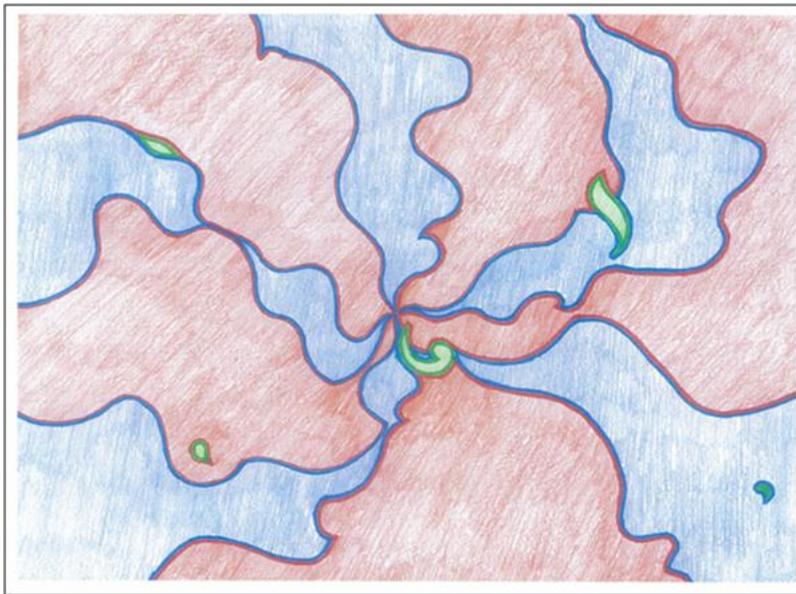
Initially, conversation was shaped by a selection of prompts provided to each participant prior to our first meeting. Ellis (2006) maintains that using these types of pre-interview activities cultivates appreciation for the wholeness and complexity of a participant's life as well as the more immediate context of the experience being explored. The following are two of the seven suggestions I offered to begin our conversations together:

- Create a timeline identifying important events and reflections that have shaped who you are as a teacher. This timeline could include words and/or pictures.

- Use 3 colours to create an abstract diagram about how it feels, or what it is like, to be a teacher.

Typically, pre-interview activities are related to the research topic with the intention of encouraging reflection, directing initial conversation, and invoking an atmosphere of respect (Ellis, Janjic-Watrich, Macris, & Marynowski, 2011). All four participants responded to this opportunity using at least one of the suggestions: Grace reflected on her journey to become a teacher with a timeline tracing significant events since childhood; Mark created an abstract three-colour diagram composed of swirling red and blue hurricane-like waves and green organic shapes embedded within representing the tiny moments of calm serenity that happen in the midst of his teaching experience:

Figure 1: Mark's Pre-Interview Activity Response



Laura identified 18 words and phrases shaping her developing understanding of being a teacher, explaining each and its relationship to her experience; David responded to all seven using written notes to guide his reflections and observations. In addition to inviting and supporting our initial conversation, pre-interview activities offer participants the opportunity to make visible—through words or drawings—their current thinking about the experience being explored. This was particularly so with Mark whose artistic rendering of what it is like to be a teacher (Figure 1) became a touchstone for his reflections over our time together.

Kvale (1986) suggests crafting possible interview questions and prompts in response to the specific research questions they are intended to explore (p. 131). Prior to the beginning of the inquiry, I generated a list of open-ended questions and provocations to explore the two essential questions framing the study. The following is a sampling of those prompts:

Inquiry Question 1: In what ways do preservice teachers construct an emerging professional identity during their teacher education program?

*Tell me about a time when you felt most like a teacher . . .*

*What does the phrase 'being a teacher' mean to you?*

*Tell me about someone who has influenced you as a teacher?*

Inquiry Question 2: What prompts and nurtures, confronts and challenges understandings of professional identity in the lives of preservice teachers?

*When do you feel strong as a teacher? Why then?*

*When do you feel weak as a teacher? Why then?*

*Who will you be as a mentor teacher? Why?*

I used this outline extensively throughout the 15 weeks of this study to direct my thinking and to ensure I was, as much as possible, inviting consideration of both questions structuring this inquiry. Of course, as the conversations developed and my relationship with each participant deepened, additional areas were revealed for more specific examination. As a starting point, this generated list offered a framework to support on-going conversations while the unfolding data directed additional, more specific prompts and questions.

**Data analysis and interpretation.** Stake (2010) suggests the process of data analysis and interpretation is both the taking apart of data and then, the drawing together of emerging understandings in different ways: synthesis. Beginning immediately after our first conversation together, I listened to the audio recordings, reviewed transcripts in light of the questions guiding this inquiry, and drafted prompts to provoke deeper reflection in subsequent conversations. In this way, I was responsive to the particular context of each intern while at the same time remaining tethered to my essential questions.

As I became acquainted with the data and its emerging categories, I began the process of “putting together” by creating a concept map for each inquiry question (Glesne, 2006). Ultimately, the process of connecting data drew my attention across the maps; in order to facilitate synthesis I arranged the data clusters on large paper, identifying places of overlap, connecting ideas, and clarifying relationships. This conceptual synthesis led naturally to the stories, portraits, and reflections I crafted to illustrate and communicate what it means to journey on the borderlands between being a student and becoming a teacher.

### **Glimpsing Borderlands of Possibility**

“I know,” Dolores said, “you have been hearing some story from Mr. Watts, and a story in particular, but I want to tell you this. Stories have a job to do. They can’t just lie around like lazybone dogs. They have to teach you something.” (Jones, 2007, p. 86)

Becoming a teacher is a struggle; it takes courage to recognize the cultural expectations of who we should *be* as teachers and to dwell in a state of becoming. This inquiry offered several opportunities to glimpse what lies on the borderlands of possibility. Summoning responsibility, these glimpses have to teach us something: They cannot simply “lie around like lazybone dogs” (Jones, 2007, p. 96). The findings of this inquiry provoked me as a teacher educator to think about the ways in which our curriculum and our pedagogy could encourage and support the construction of professional identity during this time of transition.

## Intentional Consideration of Becoming: A Conceptual Framework for Engagement

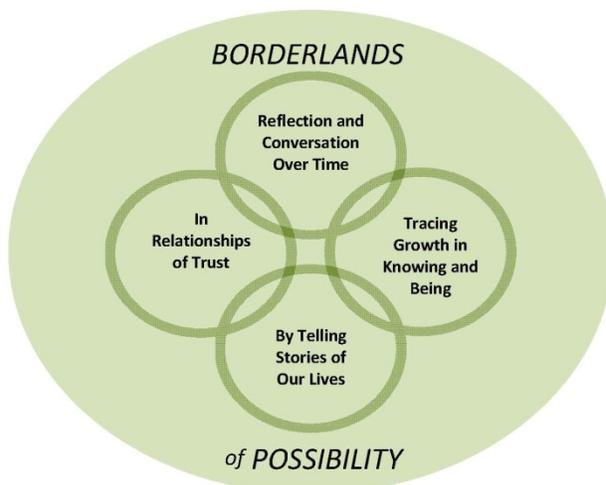
All four interns spoke about how being involved in this study prompted consideration of who they were becoming as teachers. Near the end of the internship, Grace observed: “I’ve been noticing things I might not have noticed . . . if I wasn’t looking for them.” And in our culminating conversation together David related:

I’m still thinking about what is a teacher, because we asked that question: What is being a teacher? If no one was asking that question, I don’t think I would have thought about it. . . . My thoughts have changed over the months about what it means to be a teacher. At the beginning I said, students come first. But now . . . it’s like . . . students come first!

Without this prompting, as Grace and David indicated, each doubted they would have paid such close attention to the kinds of changes taking place within them as they worked to construct understandings of the self that teaches (Palmer, 1998). And though the development of a professional identity begins more formally during preservice teacher education, it is a dynamic, ongoing construction and reconstruction of who we are becoming as teachers: We never fully arrive. Laura recognized this when she said, “You’re never really done becoming a teacher until you’re retired, and even then, you could probably still become a teacher if you kept teaching.” This inquiry highlights the value of intentionally and purposefully inviting reflection and conversation in order to explore the construction of professional identity.

Four essential aspects of experience were distilled from the findings of this inquiry to assist teacher educators when crafting curriculum to engage preservice teachers in the consideration of who they are becoming. Represented visually as intertwined circles, existing within, and being made possible by, the tension and ambiguity described metaphorically as an ecotone, this model (Figure 2) identifies the importance of all four elements of experience, linked together, on the borderlands of possibility: Over time, in relationship with others, student teachers on the borderlands of their final field experience will share emerging understandings of their professional self during conversations together, in written reflections, and through the telling of stories of their lives with the hope of making visible the teacher they are becoming.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Engagement



**Four aspects of engagement.** The four circles of engagement emerged as themes from data gathered through conversations with all four participants in this study. While labeled individually, the conceptual model (Figure 2) attempts to represent these aspects as overlapping and without clear boundaries between one and the other. For the sake of clarity each is identified with its own label; however, the strength of this model is two-fold: First, it represents the intertwined nature of these aspects of engagement and second, all four circles are integrally connected within the larger whole situated on the borderlands.

**Reflection and conversation over time.** Reflection and conversation must take place over time. Just as our discussions during this inquiry spanned the 15 weeks of their internship, teacher education curriculum designed for the intentional consideration of becoming must invite interaction throughout the final field experience. Both Mark and David identified the value of being able to review transcripts of earlier conversations. David explained:

I would go back and read the transcripts: oh, did I say that? That's funny because this week I did something totally different. It's interesting to see that . . . even to remember what I said the first couple of weeks. I'd take a look just to see what I did say and I would read it. It made me think of the stuff I thought of.

Mark offered similar observations in our final meeting together:

I read the transcript, reflected on it, and go, yeah, that's where I was at that point. Well I'm not there anymore, I'm way past that now or . . . I'm still dealing with that and think some more.

Made visible through their responses to the pre-interview prompts as well as through the transcripts of our conversations, both David and Mark highlight the essential role of engaging in focused and intentional reflection over time.

Thus, it will not be sufficient to engage conversations at the end of the practicum and expect rich reflections; interaction throughout the weeks of the field experience is needed for pondering the significance of events and for tracing the development of thinking and being. If possible, it would be ideal to begin prior to the start of the practicum, extend through the weeks, and offer opportunity for final reflections after the field experience is completed.

**Tracing growth in knowing and being.** These tangible, chronological reflections on experiences and thinking offer support and direction for student teachers as they construct understandings of who they are becoming as teachers. This was powerfully demonstrated by David who arrived at our final conversation fully prepared to talk about the ways in which his thinking and his instructional practice changed over the weeks of the internship. He used examples from the transcripts of previous conversations as evidence to support his growth and explained the process he used:

And I would compare what I said in the first conversation with what I said in the second and then, what I'm saying now. It's that feeling of success that drives me to want to grow. It's the reflective aspect: it is important to take a look at where you were and then have I got there in the end? Have I grown and changed?

David's systematic use of his pre-interview reflections and the transcripts to identify areas of success, trace his growth over the weeks of his internship experience, and make sense of his

emerging professional identity illustrates the value of such practice, particularly during the final field experience.

While not realistic to audio tape and transcribe conversations in this way over the course of the final term with multiple students, reflective writing prompts could be crafted to act as a means of anchoring emergent understandings in time. In similar fashion, teacher educators could construct a reflective framework to engage students in considering these essential questions beginning in the first year of their teacher education program. Much like the transcripts on which David relied, these reflections could be used intentionally, later, to trace growth in knowing and being.

In addition, practicum supervisors have two important responsibilities during these conversations together. First, they must intentionally invite consideration of the essential question: Who is the self that teaches? (Palmer, 1998). It cannot be assumed that this question will emerge naturally during discussion; in fact, given the experience of the four interns in this study, without clear provocation to think about their emerging professional self, they would have been unlikely to do so. It will be the responsibility of practicum supervisors to maintain this question as the focal point of interaction. Second, those involved with student teachers—either as practicum supervisors or as instructors—must share their own journeys to become teachers. The construction of a professional identity is a dynamic, on-going challenge: We are never fully a teacher. By reflecting on their own developing understandings in response to this essential question, practicum supervisors will encourage conversations that draw all into the shared journey of becoming a teacher.

***In relationships of trust.*** Those involved in making decisions about teacher education curriculum must recognize the need to offer opportunities for those involved to cultivate relationships of trust. This requires more than decisions about how and when to schedule times to meet together and topics to be introduced to prompt rich conversation. While both of these are important structural considerations, establishing relationships of trust between student teachers as well as between student teachers and their mentors poses inherent challenges.

First, it must be acknowledged that the final field experience is a time of stress and expectation for preservice teachers and this emotional context may hinder the nurturing of relationships between students. They are keenly aware of the competition that exists to secure a teaching position once the final practicum is complete and, as a teacher educator, I have observed this reality undermine relationships established over the previous years of academic coursework. In contrast, I have also watched students, especially in the final days of the practicum when some have already been offered teaching positions, act in sensitive and caring ways toward their colleagues. Teacher educators need to recognize this particular context, talk openly with student teachers about this reality, offer opportunities to develop job-seeking and interview skills, and work intentionally to support their students during this time of uncertainty when, more than ever, relationships of trust are needed.

The second challenge is related explicitly to the mentor-mentee relationship. Each of the four participants in this study established very different relationships with the individuals they looked to as mentors. Reflecting on her mentor teacher, Grace shared: “We got along super well. She told me on the first day: ‘This is going to work, we have so much chemistry!’” And while she offered an example of a challenging conversation about classroom management, which

Grace admits she took personally, the relationship between the mentor and the mentee was strong and flexible: “So we talked for quite a while, kind of hashed it out, got on the same page, and then it was fine.”

In contrast, Laura’s first internship placement, lasting almost seven weeks, prompted her to question decisions she was making in the classroom and, ultimately, to wonder whether she was capable of becoming a teacher. A number of circumstances contributed to the difficulty Laura experienced: a school context two hours from the university, the illness of her faculty supervisor, and an apparent lack of understanding of the internship expectation for half-time teaching all made the placement challenging. However, her lack of a nurturing relationship with her mentor was the most troubling:

Being around her just made me feel so unsure and just really uneasy and just not comfortable. I came home upset almost every single night. I went to sleep, could not sleep, woke up feeling . . . just dreading it, just dreading going. I would go and not want to be there because everything I was doing wasn’t right, and I just didn’t feel confident at all. I kept thinking I have to guard myself; I can’t open up. And then I realized, I’m not here. This is not me.

In the midst of these struggles, she realized, “I’m actually here on an island without any support or anything.” By the middle of the practicum, after Laura contacted the field experience office, arrangements were made for her to complete the 15 weeks in a different classroom. We met between the two placements and I asked about her final days. She reflected:

Friday was my last day. I thought I would be sad to leave these kids. It’s honestly hard for me to say, because I feel guilty feeling this way. I’m not really attached to any of these kids and I think that’s completely on my end. I wasn’t myself; I couldn’t be attached to them because I wasn’t . . . I don’t know . . . I think after a while I became closed off to the whole situation, the whole experience. I couldn’t really be sad to leave if I didn’t emotionally have space for those relationships. I did care about them but not with my whole heart in it.

Fortunately, Laura’s second placement was entirely different: both her mentor teacher and her faculty supervisor established relationships of trust, identified her strengths, and supported her growth throughout. For Laura and for Grace, the role of the “more capable peer” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) was essential in their journey to be a teacher; however, establishing these essential relationships can be challenging.

Traditionally, mentoring has been viewed as a hierarchical relationship where the mentor possesses the experience and as well as the knowledge and skills required by the protégé or mentee to become a successful practitioner (Ambrosetti, 2014). Ehrich and Millwater (2011) suggest this perspective is consistent with a clinical supervision model and its “notions of hierarchy and demarcation between expert and novice” (p. 469); Awaya et al. (2003) argue this traditional understanding creates an environment for possible power struggles between the mentor and mentee. In addition, they suggest the very phrase “the role of the mentor” embodies a presumption of rank and of a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor “assumes the dominant role and the student teacher is relegated to the dependent position” (p. 48). Added to these relational challenges emerging from within the political context of schooling (Ehrich & Millwater, 2011) is the fact the mentor teacher, occasionally in collaboration with the faculty

supervisor, drafts the final evaluation of preservice teacher performance used by school administrators when considering applications for teaching positions. There is little question that establishing relationships of trust within this context is fraught with challenges.

In contrast to the typical mentor-mentee, teacher-student teacher relationship described above, my status as an outsider, a researcher uninvolved in their immediate experiential context, facilitated conversations with each participant and allowed a relationship of trust to develop over the months of their internship. Not only could they share observations and reflections about their classroom experience, they were free to relate their shortcomings and frustrations knowing I was not, in any way, part of their final evaluation. Is it possible, even in a small way, to establish this level of trust between mentor teachers and their student teachers given the political nature of schooling, the structure of teacher education programs, and the expectation for evaluation? And if so, how might this be accomplished?

Recognizing both the inherent challenges and the significant benefits of working to establish these relationships of trust, numerous researchers have responded to these questions and offer suggestions for teacher education programming (see Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Ambrosetti, 2014; Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekkers, 2014; Awaya et al., 2003; Bradbury & Koballa, 2008). Of particular interest is the work of Awaya et al. (2003), which addresses the imbalance of power between a mentor and her mentee by offering three programmatic suggestions: First, create a culture of mentoring that “encourages teachers and students to view each other as collaborators and fellow decision makers rather than figures holding unequal positions in a hierarchical structure” (p. 52). Second, prior to working together in the context of a classroom practicum provide an opportunity for members of both groups to become acquainted and to build relationships with each other. Third, these established relationships allow for more informed pairings, which were most often created by the mentor teachers and student teachers themselves who grew to recognize their suitability for each other. Rather than an arrangement made by a field experience officer, oftentimes based on teacher availability as well as grade and subject specialization, this model supports the understanding that mentoring should be both a personal relationship and a collaborative partnership.

There are neither simple nor foolproof ways to cultivate relationships between student teachers as well as between mentors and their mentees. They are, after all, human relationships subject to the context of schooling and to the backgrounds and experiences of the individuals involved; however, it is our responsibility as teacher educators to be aware of the attendant challenges and to support both mentor teachers and their mentees as they share understandings, reflect on their growth, and work together to meet the learning needs of children. As we reflect on the nature of the final field experience and the inherent challenge for classroom teachers to be both a mentor and an evaluator, it may be that the structure of the final report becomes more collaborative with all three individuals assuming significant responsibility for its creation: student teachers reflecting on their professional growth over the field experience, mentor teachers commenting on instructional and relational capabilities as observed during the field experience, and faculty supervisors offering broader, more programmatic perspectives of student teacher development. Ehrich and Millwater (2011) write: “Mentoring is a reciprocal and dynamic power based relationship between a mentor and a mentee that requires careful negotiation” (p. 478). I suggest as teacher educators we are uniquely situated to assist in this careful negotiation by working to ameliorate the contextual challenges while at the same time facilitating spaces for fruitful conversation and dialogue.

***By telling stories of our lives.*** Finally, student teachers must be encouraged to tell their stories. Although interns in this study seemed reluctant to share stories of challenge and difficulty, they were willing to recall episodes of success and anecdotes demonstrating their growing capability as teachers. Perhaps, when in the midst of difficulty, these narratives have the power to undermine our confidence and sense of self. Laura described how her experience with her first mentor teacher was so unsettling she began to wonder if she was responsible for her struggles:

So I started thinking maybe I am completely just doing the wrong things and completely just not meant for this job and not meant for this lifestyle? I mean why is she saying these things to me that, I don't know, almost make me feel ashamed of what I tried, or ashamed of what I had done?

Yet, I am convinced there is value in sharing these narratives, and, in particular, telling the stories of our teaching and learning lives. David's story of his experience as a Grade 11 student was a milestone in his eventual desire to be a teacher:

Well . . . if I think back and try to trace how I got into teaching . . . it would have started back when I was in Grade 6 . . . in 1996. I had a teacher that year who actually said to us, to the whole class: "Boys are not as smart as girls." I was already kind of shutting down by then and her comment didn't help. After that point, I really didn't try in school, or anything.

This went on through junior high and into high school. I just didn't feel like school was for me but I couldn't drop out because I didn't feel like I could, because my parents wouldn't have supported that. I just didn't want to be there. I didn't really try hard: I did absolutely the minimum to pass. That's how it was with me.

But then that changed in Grade 11 with these two teachers; they opened my eyes to how school is important. The first was a history and law teacher; I had him for those two classes. I had seen him before when he was a substitute so I kind of knew what he was like. He asked lots of questions: "Why do you think that?" Not just yes or no answers. And he liked to joke around and use humour in the class. He would make these little sarcastic comments or we'd banter back and forth. He'd make a comment and I'd give it back to him and he'd give it back to me. It was just a fun relationship or fun atmosphere where I felt welcome to be in the classroom. The other teacher I had was an English teacher. She just had so much passion for her profession. It came through in everything and it really made me want to be there because everything was so exciting, everything was so new. It was really nice to be in that classroom.

Now, when I look back on my experience in Grade 11 with these two teachers, I can see parts of them in my teaching. They cared that we handed in work and would push us, making sure that everyone was able to do their best. Like . . . right now I want everyone to succeed . . . I want to make sure everyone is the best they can be. I don't know if it came out in my early practicums but as soon as I started reflecting on these things I can actually see it in my own teaching.

David's growing understandings of the ways in which his past experiences as a learner are shaping his instructional practice and professional identity offer evidence of how important it is to engage conversation prompting consideration of where we have come from: it invites a space for puzzling out how past experiences make sense in the context of "the Now" (Carr, 1986, p. 95). Polkinghorne (1988) suggests we work to make our existence whole by "configuring personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be" (p. 150). Sharing narratives of past, present, and anticipated experiences is an essential aspect of developing self-understanding.

These four themes, represented as intertwined and overlapping circles of engagement, encourage the intentional consideration of who we are becoming as teachers. Ecologically, ecotones are areas of tension and struggle, of promise and possibility. This conceptual framework has the potential to guide teacher educators as they support preservice teachers in the construction of professional understandings on the borderlands of their final field experience.

### **Points of Departure**

The outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where one question grew before. Every goal of research is necessarily a point of departure. (Veblen, 1969, p. 33)

Glesne (2006) suggests, "True research does not end. Instead, it points the way for yet another search" (p. 220). As this inquiry developed, I became increasingly intrigued by the nature of the relationship between the student teacher and the "more capable peer" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86): the mentor teacher. And while there is a growing body of literature focused on mentor teachers and their work with student teachers, a number of questions emerge, specifically, from the findings of this inquiry. First, in what ways do mentor teachers participate in the process of internalization wherein every function appears twice: initially on the social level and then within the individual. Is this process limited to the skills of instruction? How might mentor teachers share their own understandings of the professional self such that the process of internalization is enhanced? In what ways do mentor teachers draw novices into the culture of teaching?

Second, this study identified the essential role of the mentor teacher in supporting the construction of professional identity with interns. What is the experience of mentoring a new member of the professional community like? What does it mean to *be* a mentor? And in what ways could teacher educators support this relationship? These questions, related to the nature of the relationship between mentors and student teachers, invite points of departure worthy of further exploration.

### **Reflections on Borderland Experiences**

We think of the self as a central continuity, yet recognizing that the self is not identical through time is the first step in celebrating it as fluid and variable, shaped and reshaped by learning. (Bateson, 1994, p. 64)

The borderlands are rich, shifting spaces. Glimpsed during my journeys over months of doctoral studies I became captivated by these landscapes where foliage of all kinds exists side by side, or perhaps on top of the other. Ecologically, these are ecotones. Metaphorically, their existence provoked me to think about these spaces as crossroads of being and becoming: times in our lives

when we are neither one nor the other, not a student nor yet fully a teacher. Ultimately, I came to understand these times of transition as borderlands of possibility.

Preservice teachers engage in coursework and field experiences that both validate and challenge their existing understandings of who they are and who they are becoming. Often unaware of the essential role these self-understandings assume in shaping classroom learning, they are focused on first knowing about mandated programs of study and then creating engaging learning experiences to meet these expectations. Yet, who we are as teachers—our professional self—has the power to influence the quality of learning opportunities for children and youth in classrooms (Hamachek, 1999; Aoki, 2005b).

This understanding prompted consideration of the ways in which teacher education programs are the site for the development of teachers ontologically: who we are and who we are becoming. Just as a child arrives at school and is, over time, transformed through discourse, cultural mediation, and within crucial relationships (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000), a student entering a first year of a teacher education program must begin to construct a new subject position: the teacher. While never complete, this transformation culminates in teacher education programs during the final field experience: that borderland space characterized by both uncertainty and possibility. School, Packer (2001) argues, “involves ontological change, change in the kind of person a child becomes” (p. 131); I suggest these borderlands have the power to invite ontological change: change in the kind of teacher a student becomes.

Two essential questions guided this exploration of the construction of professional identity with the four intern teachers taking part in this inquiry:

- In what ways do preservice teachers construct an emerging professional identity during their teacher education program?
- What prompts and nurtures, confronts and challenges understandings of professional identity in the lives of preservice teachers?

Data was gathered through conversational interviews. Our first conversation was shaped by each participant’s completed pre-interview activity; as I reviewed transcript data over the 15 weeks of the internship subsequent conversations engaged both the questions crafted to explore the primary research questions as well as prompts responding to reflections made by each participant. In this way the inquiry was focused, yet responsive to developing understandings.

Four aspects of experience, emerging from the findings of this inquiry, informed the construction of a Conceptual Framework for Engagement (Figure 2). This model directly addresses the two inquiry questions posed at the outset and makes visible the importance of all four elements of experience, linked together, on the borderlands. Liminal spaces, ecological ecotones, provoke tension and struggle. Interns in this study experienced self-doubt because of a difficult relationship with a mentor, worries about meeting the learning needs of every child in the classroom, and tensions related to classroom management. These spaces also invite promise and possibility.

Findings of this inquiry indicate that preservice teachers are supported in their journey to construct understandings of their professional self when offered the opportunity, over time, to engage in conversations together, in written reflections, and in sharing narratives of challenge and success. Bateson (1994) suggests that the self is “fluid and variable, shaped and reshaped by

learning” (p. 64). Our responsibility as teacher educators is, then, to intentionally and purposefully craft curriculum focused on tracing growth in knowing and being, thereby prompting and nurturing the construction of professional understandings on the borderlands of possibility.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>As I explored the idea of borderlands as a unifying concept in other academic areas it seemed logical to find it used in the discipline of history. However, I discovered that in addition to the more obvious connection to the political borders between nation states, quite literally the borderlands, the field of borderlands history challenges established centrist histories by paying attention to people and spaces at the margins. Hamalainen and Truett (2011) maintain that borderlands history “shares with other new histories postmodern, poststructuralist disenchantment with master narratives and draws its inspiration from the cultural turn, which attuned historians to the micro-workings of power, the ways people create meaning, and the open-endedness of social relationships” (p. 340).

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to my colleague and friend, Gary McFarlane, who not only taught high school biology for his career in Medicine Hat, Alberta but is also a life-long inquirer. By first naming this space I described to him metaphorically, he then directed me to numerous resources explaining the ecological significance of ecotones. This information validated the tentative understandings I had of these in-between spaces and shaped the metaphor that guided this inquiry.

<sup>3</sup>*sin fronteras*, Spanish “without borders”

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms used.

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