"I Don't Think Their Goals Were My Goals": The Impact of School Social Ecology on One Music Teacher's Professional Knowledge Landscape

Stephanie Cronenberg

1 Smack!

I jumped in my seat as Michael,[1] in the driver's seat, said, "That kid just threw a snowball directly at the car." The offending snowball had hit the driver's side, but Michael appeared undisturbed as I looked over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of a young girl running back into the shelter of the high-rise apartment building on the left side of the narrow urban street. "Do you see the parent in the doorway cheering the child on?" he asked.

Michael shook his head and laughed at the absurdity of an adult encouraging a child to hit a passing car with a snowball in rather treacherous wintry conditions. It was my first day of observations in February 2015, a snow day for Centerville School district, and Michael's errands-and-tour drive took me through a neighborhood called "The Hill," home to many of the city's public school students.[2] After reaching the end of the steep street, we turned right and passed a school building with a bright blue entrance. Pointing out the window, Michael said, "That elementary school was one of the two schools taken over by the state last school year. The entire district is in danger of being taken over next school year, primarily because our test scores and the students' English proficiency are so low."[3]

[1] All names of people and places in this chapter are pseudonyms.

[2] According to the US Census Bureau, from 2009 to 2013, the median household income was $31,628 while 31.5% lived below the poverty level.

[3] According to 2014–2015 district statistics, 78.8% of enrolled students were Hispanic, nearly 30% were English Language Learners, and English was not the first language for nearly 50%. The state Board of Education designated the district as "underperforming" in 2003.

S. Cronenberg (✉)
Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
e-mail: scronenberg@mgsa.rutgers.edu

T. D. Smith, K. S. Hendricks (eds.), *Narratives and Reflections in Music Education*, Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education 28,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28707-8_7

"What changed after the takeover? Did the teachers keep their jobs?" I asked.

"They brought in a company to run the school. Teachers had to reapply for their jobs, if they wanted to stay. But if they stayed, they wouldn't be in the teacher's union because the school isn't in the district anymore. So most teachers stayed with the union."

"Where did those teachers go?"

"They had to be reassigned, if they had professional status. I don't have professional status yet, so as the district moved around teachers with professional status, I was one of several young teachers who got fired last year."

"How did you get your job back?"

"Well, that's how I ended up teaching at two schools. Rick, the music department chair, told the superintendent that if he had just been consulted, he would have explained how best to reassign the music teachers. Rick didn't want my choir program at Kennedy School to die, it's the first middle school choir in the district, so they reshuffled me. I kept sixth and seventh grade general music and the choirs at Kennedy but they added K-6 general music and a new after school 6–8 choir at Jackson. So I got my job back … but it isn't the same job. It's kind of like doing my first year all over again."

2 Evolving Methods

I first met Michael in 2014–2015 when he participated in my dissertation study (Cronenberg 2016). When I "completed" Michael's story, it ended abruptly, a story incomplete and half-told. According to my original research plan, the narrative was complete, and the research relationship was over. However, Michael's story was unfinished.

As narrative inquirers, we seek to live alongside our participants and to tell their stories as clearly and carefully as possible. However, those stories are constantly evolving due to both the researcher entering into relationship with the participant and the ever-changing nature of the participant's life. According to Clandinin (2013), research puzzles in narrative inquiry shape the inquiry by allowing researchers to "begin in the midst, and end in the midst, of experience" (p. 43). Thus, a narrative inquirer might begin with a research puzzle, but while listening to participants' voices alter the scope of the study based on the experience. I purposefully reconnected with Michael in 2017–2018 to consider his ongoing experience through the lens of the following research puzzle: How does school ecology (Waters et al. 2009) alter a teacher's professional knowledge landscape and thus the experiences, beliefs, and voice of a practicing music teacher?

This is a two-phase longitudinal narrative study with a single middle level (5th–8th) music teacher, Michael, working in the eastern United States.[4] The two phases of data collection in 2014–2015 and 2017–2018 both included interviews and multi-day classroom observations. I employed emergent coding and cyclical

[4] Each phase was approved by the Institutional Review Board at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign or Rutgers University, respectively.

analysis (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) across the combined data set. I adopt Craig's narrative conception of a "constellation of stories" told of and by teachers and told of and about school reform (Craig 2007) to tell Michael's stories living and working within two school communities in the present era of school reform. Michael reviewed a draft of this chapter and his edits have been incorporated.

3 Professional Knowledge Landscape and School Social Ecology

In this chapter, I apply the concepts of professional knowledge landscape and school social ecology specifically to teachers working with young adolescents (ages 10–15). Young adolescents desire autonomy and support, which are fostered through positive relationships with adults in their daily lives (Mee and Haverback 2016; Nakkula and Toshalis 2006). However, teachers seeking to develop these relationships with students as part of their professional knowledge landscape are dependent upon the school community, particularly the school social ecology, within which they work.

Clandinin and Connelly describe a teacher's professional knowledge landscape as existing at the interface of theory and practice and "comprised of relationships among people, places and things" (1995, p. 5) with whom a teacher interacts both within and beyond the classroom walls. Within the classroom, teacher-to-student interactions are primary and many teachers feel the safety associated with classroom autonomy. In contrast, relationships with other adults and the authority of administrators or policies become primary outside the classroom (Clandinin and Connelly 1995). In an ideal world, a teacher's philosophical beliefs align with the whole school's philosophy. However, tensions on the professional knowledge landscape emerge when the within and out-of-classroom philosophies do not align.

Navigating tensions on the professional knowledge landscape is one of the most challenging tasks of teachers in eras of reform. According to Craig, "the landscape metaphor accounts for the human exchanges that occur within school contexts as well as for the introduction of different reform ideas" (2003, p. 628). In schools facing reform or other challenges (such as not meeting standards or imminent district takeover), the within-classroom space may be "invaded" by administrative directives imposed or increased administrative or government oversight (see Craig 2001, 2003, 2009). In addition, many teachers experience strained interpersonal relationships with administrators and colleagues when reform initiatives are instituted without teacher buy-in. These out of classroom pressures can lead to teacher marginalization or intolerable professional tensions which, if not resolved, can result in the teacher choosing to leave the school community (Huber and Whelan 1999).

Waters et al. (2009), psychologists focused on young adolescence, proposed a four-phase theoretical model they called school social ecology, designed to help illuminate the ideal school environment for healthy young adolescent development.

This model specifically delineates four components of the out-of-classroom space on the professional knowledge landscape: (1) a school's organizational structures, (2) the manner in which the school functions, (3) building facilities and other physical elements, and (4) the nature of relations between students, staff, and parents. Ostensibly, when these elements are developmentally appropriate, middle level students are more likely to be happy and successful in school.

Drawing on the school social ecology model (Waters et al. 2009; see also Waters et al. 2010; Rowe and Stewart 2009, 2011), I contend that these four components also directly impact a teacher's professional knowledge landscape, either creating or alleviating tensions, depending on the school community. Waters et al. (2009) argue that the interaction of these four components help to create a healthy school community in which young adolescents can thrive.

I believe the same can be said of their teachers: An unhealthy school social ecology for young adolescents results in a myriad of tensions on their teachers' professional knowledge landscapes. For example, if middle level students struggle to learn because their classroom is ill-equipped with inadequate materials, inappropriately sized desks or chairs, or lack of separation from other activities, a tension arises for the teacher who must try to meet these fundamental needs before ever addressing curricular content. This teacher is likely unable to reach curricular goals when facing fundamental physical limitations (component three) imposed by the school building and/or administrator allocation of resources. Similarly, tensions arise when scheduling is haphazard and results in overcrowded classrooms or inadequate planning time (component one), when arts teachers are excluded from decision-making or when age-inappropriate rules or procedures are imposed (component two), or when administrators fail to acknowledge the importance of arts learning or only support student learning in select areas of the curriculum (component four). Schools that disregard fundamental learning needs for young adolescents inadvertently create tensions on their teachers' professional knowledge landscapes, tensions these teachers may fight against every day in order to provide the developmentally appropriate learning they know is necessary for their middle level students.

Tensions are also alleviated or non-existent when the four components of school social ecology are carefully designed to appropriately support young adolescents as they develop. However, because tensions in these environments are less visible or do not exist, these aspects of a middle level learning environment often go unnoticed. An appropriate school social ecology enables teachers to provide the kind of curriculum and pedagogy they know will best enable their middle level students to succeed; an inappropriate school social ecology adds to a teacher's burden as he/she attempts to listen to students and provide for their developmental needs within the classroom despite the out-of-classroom environment.

In what follows, Michael strives to reach each young adolescent enrolled in his general music or choral classes within two contrasting school communities, separated by 3 years. The differences are due primarily to the appropriate middle level school social ecology cultivated (or not) by the administrators and other adults within the school community, and the willingness of Michael's administrators to listen to his needs and goals as a music educator. In both schools, Michael must

navigate challenges with building facilities, but school organizational structures and functioning, along with relationships with administrators and colleagues, either hinder or support his desire to develop relationships with his students and to provide them with developmentally appropriate music learning.

4 Movement One: Centerville School District

In 2014–2015, Michael was in his fourth year of teaching in the Centerville District. A pianist, vocalist, and guitarist, he taught piano lessons and substitute taught for 2 years after graduating from a small, private college in 2009. Michael began his first full-time teaching position at Kennedy School (a K-8 school) during the 2011–2012 school year and immediately faced challenges with building facilities and relationships with his colleagues. Teaching from a cart, he moved from one middle school room to another. Classroom teachers were resistant to him using their classrooms during their prep time, so each quarter of the year, he would be assigned a new "home" for each class period.

> *I would spend the marking period*[5] *teaching in one classroom and then after that marking period I'd get switched to an entirely different room … so they made it that I had kind of a shifting classroom. So every classroom was different; for instance, I had some classrooms where the chairs were free from the desks so if I wanted, you know, to be in circles or rows or whatever I could do that …. I also had rooms where the chairs were connected to the desks …. We did chorus in these rooms and there might be twenty desks and I might have thirty-something kids.*[6]

*****

Kennedy School Classroom #1

"They cancelled the library program throughout the district," Michael told me as, cart-less, he carried his backpack, his breakfast of instant oatmeal packets, and some musical equipment from the cafeteria stage to the now abandoned library. "So this is where I teach sixth and seventh grade general music as well as sixth grade chorus. I can't have sixth grade chorus on the stage because the elementary students are still eating breakfast during first period."

In the library, Michael set down his supplies and I found a chair at what I assumed was the back of the room. Suddenly and noisily, though I heard no bell, students entered the library-turned-music-room en masse. They milled about the room searching for their groups from last class. "Mister," a student said over the ruckus, "our table isn't here."

---

[5] Michael uses the term "marking period" to refer to a portion of the school year between two report cards. In this case, report cards are sent out on a quarter system.

[6] All italicized text is directly quoted from interview transcripts. Quoted dialogue is reconstructed from fieldnotes.

"Somebody moved the tables," Michael answered, "hang on a minute." General confusion occurred for a few minutes as Michael circulated the room, moved students, created a workspace for each group, and moved a tiny child's size whiteboard on a wheeled easel toward the front of the room.

"Ok, so today we will continue …" Three male students noisily entered the classroom late and interrupted Michael in his instruction. "Find your groups please. Last time you were working on your movie scenes and soundtracks. Today you need to develop a description for at least one scene in your movie. What is the word to describe when music relates to something in the scene?"

"Cue" came the answer from around the room. "Right. Remember as you write each scene, you need to describe the specific action in the scene that tells when the music will play and then name the specific piece of music. If you want, you can change the names or gender of the characters in the movie summary I gave you if it makes sense for your choices. For example, if you want to use all Spanish music, then you can change the names of the characters to Spanish names. Don't forget to write down your ideas as you work."

Amid the buzz of student chatter, Michael circulated the room providing encouragement and guidance. When Michael moved to the group of boys near me, he noticed they had nothing written on their paper. Michael said, "explain to me what's happening in this scene."

The students spoke excitedly in tandem, describing a dramatic action scene in which two guys are fighting in a helicopter over some kind of gadget. Michael knelt down next to the group so he could listen over the din of the rest of the class. "What's the song for this scene?" The boys looked at one another and shrugged. "I like this scene and where you are going with this. Now try to discuss a song that matches the intensity of the scene."

Due to the school's priorities and how it functioned, supplies dictated Michael's curricular decisions, particularly for general music. At Kennedy School, only a monthly supply of one ream of paper and pencils were available for his sixth and seventh grade general music class, requiring Michael's creativity in designing lessons and materials. For example, in order to watch YouTube movie clips at the beginning of the movie music unit, Michael taped together several pieces of butcher paper to create a makeshift screen to hang in the library-classroom. For the movie music unit, students were given a choice of movie descriptions written by Michael and were asked to develop scenes and plan appropriate musical cues. Although this movie music unit was primarily pencil and paper, Michael had other aspirations for his curriculum.

> *When it comes to general music, I think the kids are naturally attracted to bright, shiny things with bells and whistles and lots of sounds on them [piano keyboards or other musical equipment] … but then at [Kennedy], for instance, where those resources are not available, …. I want to play to the social aspect, and I think that you play to those interests and to kids making sense of their life-world.*

When class ended, Michael collected his unopened oatmeal, backpack, and a stack of materials. We exited the library and headed back toward the cafeteria for second period.

Kennedy School Classroom #2

The members of the Kennedy School seventh and eighth grade choir filled the 50 chairs on the cramped cafeteria stage as Michael stood at the piano keyboard atop which sat his oatmeal breakfast packets. Piles of disorganized lost and found items, janitorial equipment, and cafeteria trashcans decorated the space.

The choir finished singing Michael's choral arrangement of Taylor Swift's "Blank Space," with very little enthusiasm. Michael strapped on his guitar and said to the students, "If it's not a guitar, it's not really Taylor Swift." The energy in the class lifted as they sang the song again accompanied by Michael's guitar and his prerecorded piano accompaniment that evoked the radio version.

As a creative musician, creating arrangements of pop songs for his chorus is a big part of Michael's practice because he believes students' music should be included in the music classroom (and there was no budget for purchasing music). In his own school music experiences, he was told that his music did not belong in school and he does not want his students to experience this. Michael wants students to become engaged in music education using whatever music reaches them, a lesson he learned his first year teaching:

> *This probably was January [of my first year] and this was after like nothing working from September to December and then [we sang] "Where is the Love" [by the Black-Eyed Peas]. [I thought] let's stick with this love theme because middle schoolers are big into the love theme, and we went to "Seasons of Love" [from Rent] from there and then they started singing. I remember there was this one class where the kids were singing and it was working, and I think that was the first point where I felt like OH WOW this isn't hopeless.*

Building on the "Seasons of Love" interest, Michael moved the class into an extended Broadway research project. He discovered that working in groups with peers, researching and thinking together, was a positive learning experience for his students. "*I think that you have to gauge your students; I think that's a big local thing.*"

At the end of choir, an eighth grade student asked Michael, "How did you play those chords for the Taylor Swift song?" Michael showed him each chord slowly on the guitar and named it, "D major, B minor, E minor, G major." The student nodded and then moved behind the keyboard to play the chords starting with the ones he already knew. Michael talked him through the chords and the student played through each in succession, trying to remember what Michael had taught him and beginning to play in the rhythm of the accompaniment track. Although it was time for Michael to rush to his classes at Jackson School, his relationships with students guided him to sacrifice his 50-minute prep and travel time in the interest of a student.

Jackson School Classroom #3

Immediately upon arriving at school, Michael put his bowl of still uneaten oatmeal packets on the teacher's desk, placed a chart paper tablet on the floor, grabbed a marker, and knelt down to hurriedly write out a short reading and a question on the

paper (designed to meet administrative demands for literacy integration in all subjects). When completed, he hung the paper and a roster on the whiteboard at the front of the room. Michael turned to me and said, "We have to go get the kids here."

As we walked quickly down the hallway, turned right and walked until we reached the gym, Michael explained the school organizational structures and functioning at Jackson, "At this school the students need to be escorted everywhere. I really disagree with that for middle school. Also, I've only known these students for about a week so I don't know all their names. I get a new group of sixth graders each quarter here."

When we reached the gym he spoke to the sixth grade students, "Please line up single-file," then we all walked back down the hallway to the music room. We stopped outside the classroom. "Remember, you are either in the A group or the B group," Michael began his instructions. "If you don't remember your group, check the roster on the board. Today, group A should start at the pianos and group B starts at the reading station. I'm going to ask everyone to play "Ode to Joy" for me and I'm going to give you a number from one to ten."

"Mister, is it a grade?"

"Yes, it is part of your practice grade," Michael responded as he opened the classroom door…

At 11:15, sixth grade general music ended and Michael paused at the teacher's desk. The bowl of oatmeal packets remained, waiting. Instead, Michael took his lunch box out of his backpack and we quickly ate our sandwiches. As he ate, Michael composed a short melodic notation for one of his afternoon classes. While the middle level-focused morning was over, Michael still had four elementary general music classes to prepare and teach at Jackson before the school day ended.

*****

Midway through my week observing Michael, he planned to take the seventh and eighth grade choir on an afternoon field trip to the local PBS station to record two songs for a local broadcast. This field trip had been scheduled for many weeks and was an important piece of recognition for the school and the choir.

On the day of the field trip, I arrived at school before Michael and was chatting with the school's other music teacher when Michael came down the hallway in his somewhat hurried way and said "I can't use either of my classrooms today. Both the cafeteria and the library are being used for something else." We rushed into the cafeteria and packed up the piano keyboard, amp, music, and other equipment.

"How did you find out that we can't use the cafeteria and library?" I asked.

"There was a note in my box telling me which middle school classroom I can use for the choir rehearsals. We'll be in the 7/8 language arts room. That teacher is usually pretty accommodating, but there won't be enough chairs for the seventh and eighth grade choir and we have to get ready for this afternoon. Oh, and the principal suspended three choir kids so they can't go on the field trip."

The matter-of-fact delivery of these obstacles created by administrator decisions, building facilities, and the functioning of the school surprised me. The absurd

paradox of a choir receiving external media recognition on the same day it was treated inconsequentially within its school "home" seemed almost laughable. While Michael was clearly annoyed, it was obvious that this kind of last-minute change was so common as to be unremarkable.

5 Interlude: A Big Decision

In August 2015, just before the start of the 2015–2016 school year, Michael and I spoke on the telephone. Our conversation centered on the end of the school year and his painful decision to leave Centerville. Not long after my visit, the state board of education voted in favor of a full district takeover by the state government.[7] At the end of the school year, a group of local stakeholders began meeting to discuss recommendations for a "district turnaround plan," and later the state named an outside manager to replace the superintendent and manage the takeover.

When Michael and I discussed the changes that occurred at the end of the school year, he described his altered professional knowledge landscape due to a school social ecology focused on rumors and fear, not the young adolescents enrolled:

> *It was very hard to go to work those last two months. It was like all this great positive energy [and] all of the things that were getting better in the district … it was really just like, that balloon was popped, and I think … no one even knew. Just the morale … and everyday coming in rumors, and every day somebody else was like, 'this happened to me.' And it was very very difficult. More difficult than I thought.*

As the state takeover details unfolded, teachers in the district discovered that all of the principals would remain in their positions. After spring break, all teachers were observed and evaluated by administrators. Michael personally felt he "*got an evaluation that [he] felt was completely unjust*." After doing some research on the school takeover experience of other teachers, Michael voluntarily decided to leave the district, along with at least 100 others. Over 100 additional teachers were either fired or retired. Only two of the middle level teachers at Kennedy School intended to return for the 2015–2016 school year.

Centerville School District is one of over 100 US school districts in 22 states to experience state takeover between 1989 and 2016 (Morel 2018). According to Morel (2018), "nearly 85 percent of takeovers occur in districts where blacks and Latinos make up the majority of the student population" (p. 50). Demographically, Centerville is not unlike many other takeover districts. It is an urban district serving a high Lantinx population and facing challenges such as declining enrollments and test scores, cancellation of standard school programs such as the library, and the consolidation of middle schools into K-8 buildings.

[7] Relevant news articles and district documents were referenced when writing Michael's narrative. Michael expressed concerns about confidentiality because the news articles referenced the district's name. Details were obscured and Michael approved this final version.

Students and learning outcomes are typically the focus during a state takeover while the impact on teachers receives less attention. However, a state takeover, particularly the year-long threat of takeover experienced in Centerville, directly impacts a teacher's professional knowledge landscape. Not only were parents, teachers, and administrators aware of the potential takeover, but many students were as well. Their emotions and questions penetrated the within classroom spaces while a constantly evolving set of teacher expectations shaped the professional knowledge landscape inside and outside the classroom. Musical learning and student successes in musical performance were devalued by administrators (a message received by both Michael and his students) while the school social ecology focused on literacy skill development above all other goals, including managing student behavior, cultivating community, developing student responsibility, and ensuring teacher welfare.

6 Movement Two: Riverton School District

In 2015–2016, Michael began a new position in Riverton School District, a small suburban district in the same county as Centerville. In his new position, he teaches general music and chorus full-time at Lincoln Middle School,[8] a school that serves all fifth and sixth graders in the district. Of his decision to leave and take a new position in another district, Michael says:

> *I certainly would love to make a career in [Centerville], but I knew that if I stayed there during the [takeover,] I was a high-risk person to be targeted, you know, and I don't think that their goals were the same as my goals.*

> *[Coming to Riverton] was an opportunity; it was a very difficult decision for me. But in the end, it felt like the right decision for now. I haven't ruled out going back [to Centerville] … in the future at some point. But for me, in terms of looking at the stability of this [new] job, I think that at least for now, I'd rather be on the outside looking in then having to face some of these problems from in there.*

When I visited Michael in October 2017, he was in his third year teaching on a cart at Lincoln Middle School. While still limited by the building facilities, he experienced a stability and positive relationship with his administrators unknown to him in Centerville:

> *I have an extremely supportive administration and so like its [a] night and day difference …. When the stability is there for the kids, when positive reinforcement is there for the kids, when the administrators are showing that, you know, your music education is valuable, and we celebrate the things that you do in your music education, and we trust your educators to teach it to you. You know, the kids come to class and go, alright, the teacher knows what they're doing, the administration is behind them, if I do well, there's people who will recognize me.*

*****

[8] According to 2017–2018 district statistics, 85% of students enrolled at Lincoln were White. While over 45% of students were designated "high needs," less than 5% were English Language Learners.

Pushing his cart in front of him, Michael and I walk down the hallway and into a classroom where he navigates the cart around bags, chairs, and other classroom materials to the SMARTboard at the front of the room, greeting the classroom teacher by name. As he plugs in his keyboard and connects his computer, he says hello to students and requests that homework be submitted. Students raise the tops of their desks, stowing away textbooks and removing music homework.

"Please check to see if your name is on your paper before you turn it in," Michael says to the class at large. "If you don't put your name on it, it is like a ghost completed it."

The projector comes to life and "Wade in the Water" appears on the screen. "Ok," Michael addresses the whole class, "today we are going to continue with 'Wade in the Water' and then work on our solfege and key signatures. Stand up, please."

Chairs scrape on linoleum as the students stand and push in their chairs. "Can you find the bump by your ear?" Michael asks as he demonstrates on himself. "Now open your jaw and feel the hole. Now, can you close your lips but keep your jaw open?" Michael plays a middle C on the keyboard. "Please hum this note." As he does this, he turns to a student near the front of the room and says directly to him, "you can drop this note down an octave if you need to."

For his fifth and sixth grade general music students, Michael has demystified the female and male vocal change by making it a regular part of any lesson. As the students develop during the course of the school year, Michael directs his attention to students who need guidance, drawing upon the physiology lessons he taught them at the beginning of the school year. After singing the chorus of "Wade in the Water" several times, Michael asks the students to sit down.

Michael asks a small group of students to sing the chorus of "Wade in the Water" while he adds a rhythmic bass line that repeats the words "wade in the water." After demonstrating this for the class, Michael asks the students to discuss what it is like to sing in multiple parts. A female student at the back of the room offers, "it's easier if you plug your ears."

"I agree," Michael says, "but a goal for this year is to sing my part even if I hear other things, so plugging your ears isn't the best idea because you need to listen and have your part fit in with other parts."

Michael divides the classroom in half and asks half the class to hum the Do and the other half the Sol of a major triad. "Now we have to add the middle note. How many of you have ever been on a long car ride for vacation?" Nearly every hand in the room is raised. "How many of you have ever been on a long road trip and had to sit in the middle seat between grandma and your annoying brother?" Many hands go up and comments like "two annoying brothers," "my sister and my brother," or "my grandma is dead" circulate the room.

Michael says, "The middle note is the hardest. Sometimes in choir, especially for girls, you get placed in the alto section and you don't get to sing the melody. When this happens, you might wonder if you aren't a good singer. But actually the alto part is often the hardest part because you have to really think about your part and if

it isn't in tune it can throw off the whole choir. The middle note is like the middle seat. It's the hardest."

Michael has really sold the students on singing the Mi of the chord, so when he asks, "who wants to try the middle note," nearly every hand in the room is raised.

The ease with which Michael connects to his students and their developmental needs is supported by the out-of-classroom space on the professional knowledge landscape—a school social ecology with fifth and sixth graders' learning needs at the center. Michael's connection to young adolescents and his knowledge of their interests remains an important factor of his within classroom practice on the professional knowledge landscape. In his daily practice, Michael is constantly balancing repertoire choices that challenge his students through musical exposure but also connect directly to their interests and popular culture. Michael says:

> *I think the way that I've always wanted to approach music as far as teaching it is to start with the music itself, and then take all of the things out of music that we can talk about. You can get into the rhythm or the melody or breaking down the literacy or talk about the cultural and historical aspects of the technique behind it, but I think you always start with the song …. Obviously doing "Wade in the Water" right now we're going to have a lot of opportunities to talk about social justice and you know, music's connection to it.*

*****

Following the sixth class at the end of the day, Michael collects a walkie-talkie from the teacher's lounge and heads outside. He is in charge of bus duty every day. Today, the principal joins us outside. As Michael moves away to speak with a bus driver, she says to me: "We really love Michael. He's done so much for the music program. He went from 10 kids in choir to 120 kids in choir in the first month he was here! We are so glad that he's here with us because he really knows how to talk to the kids."

When Michael rejoins us, she apologizes. "I'm really sorry, but you will need to have choir rehearsal tomorrow in the back of the auditorium rather than the front. There will be photography equipment being set up at the front for picture day."

"That sounds fine," Michael says.

"It really isn't," the principal says. "You shouldn't have to change your curriculum."

Later, when we are talking about the differences between the administrators at Lincoln Middle School compared with the administrators in Centerville, Michael shared this reflection:

> *With [my principal] here, literally one of her goals was building up the arts department here. So, I guess the converse of [Centerville]. [Here, in Riverton I] have a principal whose literal stated goal in her professional practice goal is my goal—build [the music program] up and let's make it exciting. I feel that my goal coming into any place is to make it as good as I can make it … to help create a program that the kids are excited about, they're learning from [and] inspired by.*

*****

The next morning before school, Michael is standing at his cart in the middle of the center aisle of the auditorium. The rows on either side of the aisle are labeled R1 through R8. The 120 choral students filling the seats on both sides of the aisle are singing "many mumbling mice" when two men arrive and begin setting up large lights and other camera equipment for school picture day. Michael turns on the projector and the "Spring" movement of *Four Grassi Lakes* appears on the screen. "Our goal today," Michael says, "is to get through the whole chant and get these two tricky parts to work together. Sixth grade, you first." The students chant with a typical sixth grade early morning lack of energy. Michael cuts them off and says, "think war paint in the forest. This is no longer a pretty little chorus." Referencing the song and music video of the moment, Michael says, "Pretty little chorus, in the words of Taylor Swift," Michael pauses and folds his hands together, "is dead."

All of the students laugh. A student says, "chant like a caveman."

"Yes, like a caveman—or a cavewoman—hashtag feminism! Sixth grade, again." They chant their part again with more energy and then the rehearsal proceeds.

As the choir dismisses later, a student comes up to Michael to share an observation about the rehearsal. Michael listens to him as he unplugs his cart and wraps up the cord. Michael and the student laugh as they both head out the door to first period. As Michael pushes the cart to the elevator he passes students and greets them by name. A student gives Michael a high five as he passes. As the hallway begins to clear, Michael stops to greet two students with autism who are in the hallway with their aide. Michael asks them if they are excited about music later that day. Then, the cart is moving again … on to the next location.

7 Reflections

In reflecting on the school social ecology in Centerville, particularly administrative support, and its impact on his professional knowledge landscape, Michael observed, "I don't think their goals were my goals." A positive, developmentally appropriate school social ecology for middle level students cultivates a professional knowledge landscape where the within and out-of-classroom spaces are aligned and working toward the same goals. Only after transitioning to Riverton did Michael notice the extent to which his musical and developmental goals did not align the Centerville administrators' goals.

Creating a successful school social ecology for middle level learners requires that the four components—school organizational structures, school functioning, building facilities, and interpersonal relationships—all work together for a common purpose: the developmental learning needs of the students served. In Centerville, the multiple and layered strains on the school district due to academic and economic challenges, in addition to looming state takeover, resulted in K-8 school communities with little interest in programs and supports designed for middle level learners. Michael repeatedly dealt with inadequate classroom spaces and resources, was required to comply with school functioning with which he disagreed, and worked

inharmoniously alongside administrators who disregarded his curricular and student-centered efforts. In Riverton, all aspects of the school community were designed specifically for the fifth and sixth grade students enrolled. For the first time in his career, Michael encountered an administrator who supported music learning for all students. Although physical space limitations remained, the out-of-classroom focus on the developmental needs of middle level learners freed Michael to put his time and energy where it belonged: on his students.

Michael's experiences reveal the impact on a teacher's professional knowledge landscape when developmentally appropriate practices, as well as music learning, are valued by the school community and when teachers and students' voices are heard. His experiences also show how when these goals do not align, teachers struggle. Music teachers across the country (and perhaps beyond) negotiate challenges similar to Michael's and yet their experiences are seldom heard. This chapter illuminates the importance in narrative inquiry of following a longitudinal storytelling thread to give voice to the continuing, often unheard, stories in teachers' lives.

Note: Portions of this study were conducted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as part of the author's dissertation.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank Michael for his long-term commitment to this project and Jeananne Nichols for her feedback throughout the development of Michael's narratives.

References

Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1995). *Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Craig, C. J. (2001). The relationships between and among teachers' narrative knowledge, communities of knowing, and school reform: A case of "The Monkey's Paw". *Curriculum Inquiry, 31*(3), 303–331.

Craig, C. J. (2003). Characterizing the human experience of reform in an urban middle-school context. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 35*(5), 627–648.

Craig, C. J. (2007). Story constellations: A narrative approach to contextualizing teachers' knowledge of school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 23*(2), 173–188.

Craig, C. J. (2009). Research in the midst of organized school reform: Versions of teacher community in tension. *American Educational Research Journal, 46*(2), 598–619.

Cronenberg, S. (2016). *Music at the middle: Principles that guide middle level general music teachers (Doctoral dissertation)*. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1857495335).

Huber, J., & Whelan, K. (1999). A marginal story as a place of possibility: Negotiating self on the professional knowledge landscape. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 15*(4), 381–396.

Mee, M., & Haverback, H. R. (2016). Young adolescent development. In S. B. Mertens, M. M. Caskey, & N. Flowers (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of middle grades education* (2nd ed., pp. 437–440). Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.

Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, education, and American democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nakkula, M. J., & Toshalis, E. (2006). *Understanding youth: Adolescent development for educators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Rowe, F., & Stewart, D. (2009). Promoting connectedness through whole-school approaches: A qualitative study. *Health Education, 109*(5), 396–413.

Rowe, F., & Stewart, D. (2011). Promoting connectedness through whole-school approaches: Key elements and pathways of influence. *Health Education, 111*(1), 49–65.

Waters, S. K., Cross, D. S., & Runions, K. (2009). Social and ecological structures supporting adolescent connectedness to school: A theoretical model. *Journal of School Health, 79*(11), 516–524.

Waters, S. K., Cross, D. S., & Shaw, T. (2010). Does the nature of schools matter? An exploration of selected school social ecology factors on adolescent perceptions of school connectedness. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 80*(3), 381–402.