

Composing Lives:

A Narrative Account Into the Experiences of Youth Who Left School Early

D. Jean Clandinin, Pam Steeves, Yi Li, Joy Ruth Mickelson, George Buck, Marni Pearce, Vera Caine, Sean Lessard, Claire Desrochers, Marion Stewart, and Marilyn Huber

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research is a comprehensive inquiry into the experiences of Alberta youth who left school prior to graduation. The inquiry, undertaken in 2008-2010, involved both an extensive literature review and an empirical inquiry into the experiences of 19 youth who left school early.

Literature Review

Around the world early school leaving is one of the most protracted educational problems, but also one of the least understood (Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Prior to undertaking an extensive literature review, the research team consulted with sociologists with expertise in areas such as school-to-work transitions. We also undertook a statistical overview on early school leaving for Canada and Alberta in particular, as well as for the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. The search terms we used for the literature review reflected the diverse ways early school leaving has been defined including, for example, as dropping out, school leaving, pushing out, and as disengagement.

Our literature review revealed that the primary framework for research exploring issues around early school leaving has been from an individual (risk/deficit) perspective. More recently, disengagement perspectives, which consider broader social inequities, have become more common. Most statistical studies delineate school leaving from a single point in time rather than from a process of disengagement. Furthermore, and for the most part, quantitative research presents student groups as homogenous, neglecting the great diversity within populations in school attendance, achievement and resource availability. Statistical data collected from an individual risk and deficit perspective do not explore the complexities, resilience and context of early school leavers' lives.

Problematic in the literature is that school leaving has no clearly defined boundary: researchers use various and often unstated methods of determining rates of early school

leaving. There are clear gaps and omissions in terms of who is selected for existing early school leaving studies. For example, research often ignores youth who withdraw prior to Grade 9, immigrants who never attend school, youth who attend private schools, and other groups such as youth in foster care (SickKids, 2005.)

Very few studies focus on early school leavers and families in their particularity and over time. Little attention has been paid to how diverse young people themselves frame the issue of school leaving.

The Methodology for the Empirical Part of the Inquiry

To inquire into the experiences of youth who left school without a high school diploma (early school leavers), we selected a narrative inquiry methodology. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualize narrative inquiry as a relational inquiry process within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space comprising dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. Narrative inquiry allowed us to inquire into the youths' lived experiences while staying attentive to the social, cultural, linguistic, familial, and institutional narratives within which each youth's life was embedded.

The research puzzle was composed around inquiring into how the youths' lives shaped their experiences of leaving school early and how leaving school early shaped their lives.

Participants

We identified 19 youth to participate in the study. The youth came from all over Alberta, with a higher proportion from the Edmonton area. Youth were between the ages of 18 and 21, out of school for at least one year and had left an Alberta high school early, that is, without graduating. Challenges in recruiting participants are included in our report.

Study Process

The 11 member research team was composed of researchers with diverse experiences, strengths and knowledge. Each member of the team engaged in inquiry with one or more youth. We met in places of the participants' choosing. We saw most

participants at least three times, including a final meeting to negotiate the tentative narrative accounts based on our conversations with them.

The field texts (data) consisted of transcripts of the conversations, field notes on our meetings and some of the participants' artistic representations of their experiences. In the first conversation we asked youth to tell us about their early years, early schooling, and home and family experiences, which enabled us to begin to understand their life contexts. Subsequent conversations explored the youths' school experiences including their experiences since leaving school.

First Level of Analysis

The individual narrative accounts cannot be summarized or categorized and are presented in the report in their entirety. They represent the unique and diverse voices of the youth. The research team member who worked with each youth composed a narrative account honouring that youth's narrative of experience as sources of important knowledge and understanding. We analyzed the field texts (transcripts, field notes, artifacts) through working within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to compose the narrative accounts. We were mindful in writing the accounts that it was our participants' stories shared in relation with us that we were telling.

In narrative inquiry ethical matters are considered throughout the process. Beyond the ethics review requirements of the university, we sought out, met with, listened to, wrote about, and eventually negotiated narrative accounts with each participant in the study. For the accounts our participants chose their own pseudonyms. Cities, towns and schools were either not named or given pseudonyms.

Second Level of Analysis: Developing Cross Narrative Account Threads

From late January to March 2009 our research team gathered at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, for several whole day meetings in order to share the narrative accounts with each other and begin to look across the narrative accounts for patterns. Fifteen resonant threads were identified by doing a cross-account reading. Each research team member agreed to summarize one or more threads (drawing on all relevant narrative

accounts). In May and June, 2009, we updated our literature review to ensure relevant new research was included. We continued to work with the threads on a controlled access website. By October we had reduced the 15 resonant threads to six threads described in Chapter 5 of the final report.

Resonant Narrative Threads

As a way to understand better the complexities of youths' experiences of early school leaving we elaborated six resonant threads we identified through our cross-account analysis. They are:

Conversation Spaces

The narrative accounts all speak clearly to the importance of creating conversational spaces that encouraged youth to share their life experiences, including their school and school leaving experiences. We recognized the need for safe inquiry spaces for the youth to be able to explore their life experiences and to learn to attend to the lives that they are composing. We were struck by the absence of opportunities for these reflective conversation to occur. We were also deeply impressed by the willingness of the youth to tell their stories, when given an opportunity, in thoughtful, life-affirming ways. Some of these stories suggest the youth were attempting to navigate complex institutional, social, and cultural narratives that were sometimes alienating and foreign.

Relationships

Relationships with family, friends and teachers shaped interactions and feelings about school subject matter. When relationships amongst their family, friends and/or teachers changed, it often influenced their leaving school early. In some cases fragile and emerging new stories around being successful, being accepted, and belonging were interrupted when relationships changed, be it relationships with family, peers, teachers or subject matter. Often relational changes happened through unexpected and unsought after transitions creating vulnerability, turmoil and loss for youth as they struggled to compose new stories to live by while transitioning into re-configured families, new homes, schools and/or communities.

Identities

The youth were composing their identities on elementary, junior high, and senior high school landscapes as well as on complex home and community landscapes. While they saw themselves composing who they were and were becoming, they did not tell their stories as school dropouts. Being positioned as dropouts gave them little chance to “drop” back in, something a few participants were contemplating. In rejecting the label of dropout, we recognized the youths were composing their own identities, choosing to leave or return to school as it fit in with their developing stories to live by. As students chose to leave or return to school we saw them as struggling to develop and sustain a sense of agency embodied in their unfolding lives. Participating in the study itself was, for many, an act of choice that shaped a sense of authoring/authority in their lives.

Complexities Across Time

Leaving school early is not a single event. When early school leaving is considered as a complex set of storied events composed over time, the notion of a discrete decision or factor in dropping out of school becomes problematic. As we came to know the complexity of the youths’ stories lived over time, both in and out of school, narrative threads related to participants’ yearning to be recognized as “someone” started to emerge. Interwoven in their stories to live by were sometimes contradictory plotlines that led participants to leave school early. Complexity, multilayered stress, and continuous tension resonated through many of the youths’ stories when viewed over time.

Responsibilities

Relational responsibility threads were evident in many of the narrative accounts. Many of the youth were composing lives in which they struggled to balance conflicting responsibilities. The institutional, familial, and cultural narratives in which their lives were embedded shaped their experiences. They struggled to compose their own lives but did so in ways that allowed them to stay connected with one or more parents, siblings and/or extended families and to remain responsive to cultural and familial narratives.

Sometimes these responsibilities were financial. Many of the youth had to make sense of these conflicting responsibilities on their own.

Cultural, Social, Familial, and Institutional Narratives

The youths' stories were embedded within social, cultural, institutional, and familial narratives that shaped their diverse unfolding lives. The youths' stories often told of contradictions between cultural and familial narratives and the institutional narratives, that is, the stories of school. Caught sometimes in these contradictions, the youth were humiliated or embarrassed in front of other students. Within institutional landscapes, some youth's experiences were profoundly shaped by stories of school, particularly when policies were strictly adhered to and narrowed their educational opportunities. Educational experiences in other countries were often not considered by the Alberta system.

Conclusion

We conclude the report with a number of considerations with regard to the literature review and the empirical study.

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D. Jean Clandinin, Pam Steeves, Yi Li, Joy Ruth Mickelson, George Buck, Marni Pearce.

Vera Caine, Sean Lessard, Claire Desrochers, Marion Stewart, Marilyn Huber²

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² Authorship is always a tricky business. The first 6 names are the names listed on the original grant. The following 5 names are key members of the research team who worked with 1 or more youth. Every one of us has been fully involved in the research. Without each person, the study would have been less powerful. We are deeply indebted to the youth who shared their stories with us. Without them, we would have nothing to say.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This research study emerged from an increasing concern about the experiences of youths who leave school early without a completion certification. Early school leaving is one of the most complex, perennial, and protracted social and educational problems, and one of the least understood. Although early school leaving was first recognized as a concern in the mid-20th century, demand for better skill and knowledge levels in most areas of employment has increased the concern of educators and policy makers about the complex and multiple costs of early school leaving and its social consequences.

According to Alberta Education (2005), 67% of youth who began high school in 2000/2001 in Alberta schools graduated in 3 years, a further 6% graduated in 4 years, and another 3% were expected to graduate in 5 years, by 2004/2005, for a total of 76% graduating. Approximately one fourth (24%) of the students who began high school would remain ungraduated. This high dropout rate concerns us as educators and researchers and is an urgent problem in the province of Alberta. Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) recommended a province-wide strategy be developed with a goal of ensuring 90% of students complete Grade 12 within 4 years of starting high school. Lack of high school education has lifelong consequences for the youths, including lower earning capacities, less job satisfaction, and lower health levels (McCain & Mustard, 1999). The loss of a well-educated work force of Alberta's young people has significant consequences for Alberta's economy and for the social fabric of our society.

Early school leaving is a serious and little understood phenomenon in Alberta and Canada. A comprehensive and expansive perspective is needed to provide a better

understanding of early school leaving. Furthermore, while there is research undertaken from a quantitative perspective, indicating rates and general patterns of early school leaving, there is little research that explores the life experiences of youths who leave school early. Without in-depth data that looks across the long-term experiences of the youths who leave school early, it is difficult to plan appropriate policies and interventions to support them in their efforts toward school completion. This research provides such information and understandings.

The purposes of this research study are

- to describe the life stories of early school leavers, including their accounts of the part school played in their life stories as well as their accounts of the part leaving school early played in their life stories;
- to understand the impact early school leaving without a certificate had on early school leavers' lives.

There are also three subsidiary purposes for the study:

- to conceptualize early school leavers' experiences on their identity formation;
- to examine the shaping influences of personal, family, cultural, social and institutional contexts on early school leavers;
- to identify influential people in early school leavers' stories.

This narrative inquiry into the experiences of youths who leave school early focuses on the stories youths tell about their experiences and the ways they experience early school leaving in their lives. Nineteen youths were drawn from a wide range of

contexts in Alberta that included Aboriginal, immigrant, English as a second language, urban, suburban, and rural. The study is timely given the high overall early school leaving rate, the differential rate for various groups, and the need to inform educational policies and practices. This research seeks to include the voices of the youths themselves in order to inform policy debates and public understandings.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW -

Vera Caine and Lindsay Krawchuk

Educators, policy makers, and politicians are increasingly concerned about the complex and multiple costs of early school leaving. These costs involve factors at a personal level (such as poorer quality of life and compromised well-being) (Davison, 2003), an economic level (such as higher levels of unemployment and lower income), and a societal level (such as increased demands for social services, increased crime, and reduced community participation). Estimates of past and current school leaving rates fluctuate and are often inconsistent due to varied definitions and measurements of early school leaving. Great variations are also found in the explanations for early school leaving, depending on the political, sociological, or philosophical framework chosen. Our current understanding is shaped by the assumptions that it is advantageous for adolescents to be in school rather than out of school, that any education is superior to no education, and that there are explicit social and personal costs to early school leaving.

Methodology for the Literature Review

In order to understand the process and the implications of early school leaving, an extensive literature search was conducted. A wide-ranging body of research exists on the subject of school leaving, reflecting perhaps the magnitude of the problem. A systematic search was performed using databases listed in Table 1. All of these databases were accessible through the library system at the University of Alberta. The following terms or combination of terms were used to conduct the article search: *school leaver, school*

leaving, dropout or drop out, disengagement, push out or pushout, combined with the terms school or education.

Table 1. List of Databases Used in Literature Search

Description	Database
Children and adolescent Education	Child and Adolescent Database CBCA Education, Current Research, Education Abstracts, ERIC, Primary Search
Family studies	Family and Society Studies Worldwide
Health	CINAHL, MEDLINE, Native Health Database
International	OCLC WorldCAT
Multidisciplinary	Academic Search Premier, Duke University Press, Factiva, Project Muse, Taylor and Francis Online Journals
Native studies	First Nations Periodicals, Polar Info
Psychology	PsycINFO
Social science	IBSS: International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, PAIS International, Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Research Network
U.S. government	U.S. government publications

It is important to note that intervention studies were excluded from the search, as was the issue of school leavers returning to school or attending alternative schools after

school leaving. An extensive list of literature examining the issue of dropping out of school exists. For this reason, the searches were limited to studies published within the past 13 years (1996–2009) and studies published in English, with a particular emphasis placed on studies conducted in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Studies from Europe, Asia, and South America were excluded mainly for reasons of different schooling systems and research published in languages other than English. All compiled articles were reviewed by the researchers and assessed for inclusion.

The researchers consulted three individuals at the University of Alberta who conduct research in this area.

Dr. Harvey Krahn has for many years examined the transition from school to work and has paid particular attention to fractured transitions of high school students. Dr. Krahn's expertise is in survey research, and he has examined a large data set, both regional and national, pertinent to the problem of early school leavers.

Dr. Tracey Derwing, Co-Director at the Prairie Centre for Excellence, conducts research on the issue of early school leaving of immigrant children, particularly in the western regions of Canada.

Chuck Humphrey, data librarian at the Rutherford Library of the University of Alberta, has a wealth of experience in identifying potential relevant statistical databases. In his practice he pays close attention to the limitation of using statistical information to understand the problem of early school leaving and attempting to engage in both national and international comparisons.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the literature searches it became clear that various terms were used, often interchangeably, for children and youths who left school prior to obtaining a graduation certificate. Terms such as *school leaver*, *dropout*, *disengagement/engagement*, and *pushout* carry clear labels or have connotations attached to them, yet these terms are rarely defined by authors. Historically, the term *dropout* first surfaced in the early 1900s but was not used widely until much later in the 20th century (SickKids, 2005).

The problem of early school leaving received attention starting in the 1950s. Prior to this time, early school leaving was considered normal, as children and youths often left school to contribute to the family income or worked on farms and in family businesses. The term *dropout* carrying an at-risk label began to appear in the research literature in the early to mid-1960s. Initially, the term described a new kind of deviance on the part of the student, particularly in the context of juvenile delinquency and other adolescent issues (SickKids, 2005). However, it is important to note that students who had dropped out of school tended to be welcomed back to school. Until the present time, most prevention, retention, and recovery programs are targeted towards youths who are considered dropouts (SickKids, 2005). Around the mid-1960s the term *early school leaver* appeared. Remaining popular, it is a descriptive term that generally carries few labels.

Willis (1977) introduced the idea of *resistance* in the 1970s in the UK. He saw early school leaving as a quasi-political rebellion by working class youths in response to class inequalities in schooling (Davies, 1999). The conditions for resistance include the

actuality of being powerless, the conscious feeling of being powerless, the realization that school is not working for the individual, and the clear rejection of an unequal education experience, one that is also oppressive (Munns & McFadden, 2000; SickKids, 2005). Often, students who leave due to resistance have cultural support that provides both a community safety net and a sense of solidarity. The term *resistance* has been criticized for its lack of emancipatory vision (Choi, 2005) in which youths are regarded as having more agency in their lives. The term continues to be used not only to reflect a class-based rebellion but also to highlight that young people exercise their power and are actively engaged in forming their identities. School leaving is seen as a complex, contradictory, and multilayered phenomenon (Olafson & Field, 2003).

In the mid-1980s, there continued to be a philosophical shift in the understanding of early school leavers, which brought with it recognition that early school leaving comes from a process of *disengagement*, in which early school leavers disengage themselves from the culture of schooling. Educationists generally agree that student engagement (e.g., time-on-task and participation) produces positive outcomes but note that there is disagreement about what counts as engagement (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Harris, 2008). Finn's (1989) taxonomy of engagement and participatory behaviors identified three levels of engagement. In level 1, the student demonstrates adherence to the school and classroom rules; in level 2, the student shows initiative in his/her own learning; in level 3, the student is clearly involved in the social aspects of school life. Finn sees disengagement as presenting behaviors that are contrary to engagement (e.g., not completing homework) in both academic and nonacademic school activities, as well

as to what degree the student identifies with and values school outcomes (Davison, 2003). Disengagement is seen as a nonlinear process or pathway with a transition to adulthood. This term also pays attention to the relational impact of others and that school leaving is contingent on promises (kept or broken) between people. Furthermore, student engagement or disengagement sees early school leaving as a complex and often emotional process (Harris, 2008; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; SickKids, 2005). Current academic discussions view engagement or disengagement as a multidimensional construct, although many studies investigate only one.

In Britain, the focus was to develop policies that paid close attention to the “lost generation,” which included youths who had trouble transitioning as a result of being truant and/or expelled from school, and those beyond school years but not working, training, or otherwise being educated. These policies are linked with the term *disaffection* in the UK.

In the 1990s and onward, research in the United States on early school leavers identified *pushout* and *pullout* factors as explanations for early school leaving. Youths or children are often pushed out because their presence in the school creates difficulty in meeting some goals of school; this includes low-performing students as well as students with discipline and/or behavioral problems. Pushouts tend to be students who have a history of suspensions; they do not easily fit into the school system and are encouraged or directly told to leave. Hodgson (2007) described pushout factors as poor relationships with teachers and perceptions about one’s low academic ability. Often, bureaucratic

regulations governing schools pressure large number of students to drop out (SickKids, 2005).

Although students are able to stay in school until the age of 21, some students who are over the age of 18 get pushed out of school. Unlike dropouts, who are seen as having made bad decisions in their lives, pushouts are rarely welcomed back to school. Frequently, schools see them as troublemakers who negatively impact other students. The term *pushout* was developed, in part, because the term *dropout* has distorted and misrepresented the experience of students. Dropping out is seldom a clear choice of leaving school, yet a fair number of students are pushed out and simply fade away (Hattam & Smyth, 2003).

Pullout factors, an idea that indicates that students engage in a cost-benefit analysis, construct school as only one part of youths' complex lives. Leaving school becomes a conscious and rational choice. The cost-benefit analysis includes factors such as attraction of employment, start of a family, as well as a student's lack of ability, troubles with peer groups, boredom/irritation with school, cultural/social isolation, as well as feelings of discrimination. For example, in Hodgson's (2007) study, one participant's pullout factor was a clear sense of future employment which no longer required school. Interestingly, many school leavers, with stable feelings of regret over having left school, left due to pushout factors, not pullout factors (Dekkers & Claassen, 2001; T. Lee & Breen, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

Around the 1990s, the term *opting out* also appeared in the literature, reflecting that some students simply do not want to be bothered with education. Schools in this case

do not always serve a meaningful or relevant purpose in these students' lives. Students do not take this decision lightly and often leave school for good reasons. The term *opting out* recognizes that students have agency in their lives and are active participants in their identity formation.

The term *exclusion* also began to be used in the literature, researchers observing that that disaffection and disengagement ultimately led to the exclusion of some students.

More recently the term *facilitated out* has been introduced. The term stems from a broader framework, which has a social justice orientation towards the students and their community (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). *Facilitated out* also reflects that, at times, school officials and teachers encourage students to leave school prior to school completion. Interestingly some students are labeled as *tune outs*. Tune outs are students who have disengaged from learning, but do not interrupt class or cause problems and are, therefore, tolerated or ignored (SickKids, 2005).

Until the present time there is no universally accepted definition of *early school leaving*. Leavers are typically defined as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Some students leave school before entering ninth grade (SickKids, 2005). There is also a general consensus that early school leaving is the result of a long process of disengagement (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009) and alienation that may be preceded by less severe types of disengagement such as truancy and grade retention (SickKids, 2005).

Although it is appealing to use *school leaver* and *dropout* interchangeably, this would not reflect the findings of the literature accurately. Many researchers and policy

makers use the terms without paying close attention to their individual philosophical and logistical underpinnings. However, researchers conducting qualitative studies most often use the term *early school leaver*, whereas researchers conducting quantitative studies use the term *dropout*.

Quantitative researchers struggle with the determination of the extent of the dropout rate, as there are various ways in which it can be calculated and reported. Before a dropout rate can even be calculated, researchers must agree on what constitutes a dropout. Like calculating the dropout rate, the definition of *dropout* is not always consistent. Fortunately, most reports provide a definition of the term and the way in the dropout rate is calculated. Therefore, it is usually of benefit to discuss the definitions of high school *dropout* in conjunction with the rates calculated. For the purposes of this review, when a rate is reported, a definition will also be reported. In the strictest sense, high school dropouts are those students who have left high school without meeting the requirements to receive a high school diploma. An environmental scan of the public literature, for example, newspaper articles, teacher association newsletters, policy and position papers, showed that the term *early school leaver* is now predominately used.

Statistical Overview

Canada

The purpose of this literature review is to determine the scope of and factors that contribute to high school dropping out. The reasons for students not completing high school are complex and of great interest to educators, researchers, and government

officials, as well as parents and students. Although across Canada the rate of dropping out seems to be decreasing overall, the school dropout issue still needs to be investigated. It is important to ensure certain groups are not being neglected due to a seemingly overall decrease in dropout rates. For instance, the dropout rate continues to decrease in urban schools but continues to remain relatively high in rural schools (G. Bowlby, 2005). Provincial dropout rates generally remain higher in rural areas and in small towns than in urban areas, especially in Quebec, Manitoba, and Alberta. The dropout rate also continues to be higher among males. Recent data showed the rate for men aged 20 to 24 was 12.2% in 2004–2005, compared with 7.2% for young women, although both rates have fallen since 1990–1991 (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen 2002; Statistics Canada, 2005). Also, other groups, particularly those of lower social economic status or Aboriginal heritage, are facing an extensive rate of dropout. Despite efforts to change the dropout rate for marginalized populations over the last 2 decades, a significant gap in Aboriginal students completing high school compared to non-Aboriginal students still exists in Canada. Hango and de Broucker (2007) noted that Aboriginal youths are more likely than non-Aboriginal youths to leave the education system with a much lower level of attainment. In 2006, the proportion of Aboriginal peoples aged 20 to 24 who had not completed high school was almost three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal Canadians (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Similarly, Mendelson (2006) indicated that among the Aboriginal populations in Canada, those aged 15 years and older had a much higher proportion of people failing to complete high school than the Canadian population as a whole (54% to 35%,

respectively). According to the latest available data from the 2001 census, there was a decline in both Aboriginal and the population as a whole (15 years or older) who had “less than high school” as their highest level of educational attainment. For Aboriginal peoples, the rate decreased to 48% and the population as a whole to 31% (Mendelson, 2006). A recent study by Hallet et al. (2008), which explored the role of consistent ethnic self-identification and school attrition in Canadian Aboriginal youths, found that students who consistently declared their Aboriginal heritage had the highest school dropout rate.

In a Statistics Canada report by Siggner and Costa (2005), the educational attainment of Aboriginal people living within Canada’s metropolitan areas (CMAs) was examined. The CMAs included in the study were Montreal, Ottawa-Hull, Toronto, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Regina, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary. In these CMAs, Aboriginal youths aged 20 to 24 years were less likely to have completed high school than non-Aboriginal youths. This study found that the rate of Aboriginal youths who had not completed high school declined between 1981 and 2001, but the rate for non-Aboriginal students showed a much steeper decline in the same time period. Using data from the 2001 Aboriginal peoples survey, Siggner and Costa analyzed the reasons Aboriginal youths gave for dropping out of high school. The most frequent response by Aboriginal males was “boredom” (25%), compared with 19% of non-Aboriginal Canadian males reporting the same. For female Aboriginal youth, 25% stated that the main reason they dropped out was due to “pregnancy or caring for their children,” whereas only 16% of non-Aboriginal female Canadians listed this as a reason for leaving school without a diploma.

One of the most common places to receive estimates of dropout rates is from government reports or statistics bureaus. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) data is collected by Statistics Canada, with the main objective to produce estimates and information about employment and unemployment in Canada. However, the LFS provides information on the educational attainment of the population along with school attendance estimates. When these two figures are combined with the age of respondents, a dropout rate can be calculated (G. Bowlby, 2005). Usually, the dropout rate is calculated using the 20–24 year age group as it accounts for those students who graduate high school in more than 3 years or leave school and return. Individuals in the 20–24 age group who have not graduated or are not enrolled in high school can be considered dropouts. Using LFS data, the dropout rate in 2004–2005 was 9.8%, which is a significant decrease from the rate of 16.7% in the 1990–1991 school year (G. Bowlby, 2005).

One of the most recent Canadian studies uses data from the 2000 Youth in Transition Survey (YITS; J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). The YITS is a large Canadian longitudinal study that collects information about the transitioning of youths through education, training, and into the work force. The study surveyed two major focus groups, those who began participating at age 15 and those who began their participation between the ages of 18 and 20. There were over 22,000 participants from 10 provinces that comprised the 18–20 years age group and 29,330 in the 15 years age group. The study surveyed participants every 2 years beginning in 1999 and followed participants for 7 years. The YITS defined high school dropouts as those students who were not enrolled

in a high school and had not completed the requirements to receive a high school diploma by December 1999. The high school dropout rate is the proportion of youths in a specified age group who have not completed their secondary education and were not working towards its completion (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002, p. 25).

Figure 1 depicts the dropout rate trends in Canada, defined as the proportion of high school leavers not attending school among 20 to 24 year olds by gender for the academic years 1990–1991 to 2004–2005. The dropout rate declined over the time period from 21% to 14% for men and from 16% to 9% for women. This decline in the dropout rate over time may result from both fewer youths leaving high school without graduating and a greater number of dropouts returning to complete their high school diploma before the age of 24 (Raymond, 2008).

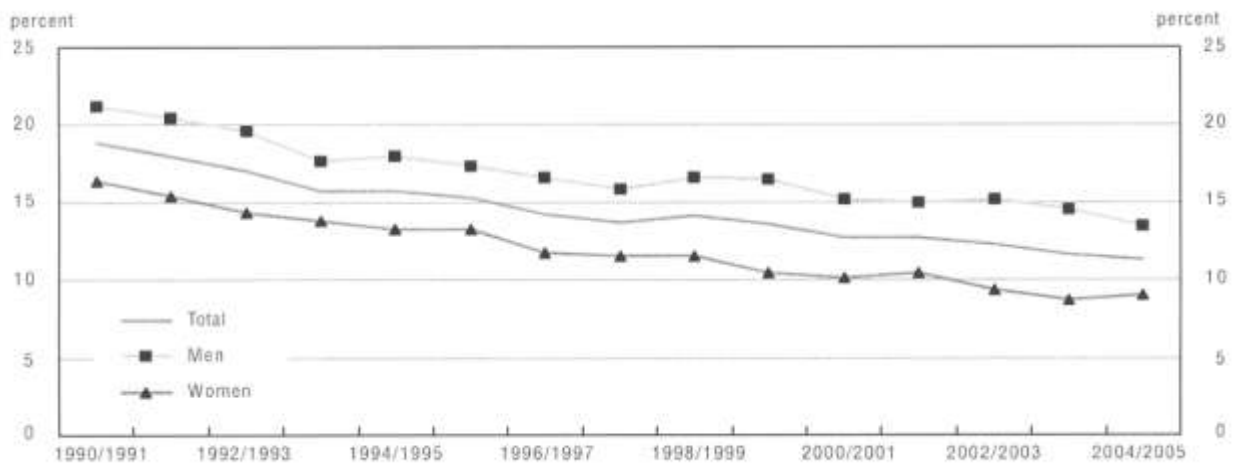


Figure 1. High school dropout rate among 20–24 year olds in Canada, academic years 1990–1991 to 2004–2005. From M. Raymond (2008), *High School Dropouts Returning to School*. Culture, Tourism and the Centre of Educational Studies. Ottawa, ON:

Statistics Canada. The dropout rate is defined as 20 to 24 year olds without a high school diploma and not in school.

While in 1990–1992 to 1992–1993, eastern Canada had the highest dropout rates in the country, over the three most recent school years (2003 to 2005) the dropout rate in these provinces has been in the 8% to 10% range, ranking them among the lowest in Canada (Table 2). With dropout rates falling as they have in Atlantic Canada, there now appears to be two groups of provinces, the first consisting of Atlantic Canada, Ontario, and British Columbia, with relatively low dropout rates, and the second, made up of Quebec and the prairie provinces, with rates that have averaged above 10% over the last 3 years. Although overall dropout rates have decreased in recent years, there remain subpopulations where dropping out remains relatively high (G. Bowlby, 2005).

Table 2: Dropouts¹ and Dropout Rate, Canada and Provinces, 1990–1991 to 1992–1993 and 2002–2003 to 2004–2005 School Year Averages²

	1990-1991 to 1992-1993		2002-2003 to 2004-2005	
	Thousands	Dropout rate (%)	Thousands	Dropout rate (%)
Canada	316.0	15.7	216.2	10.1
Newfoundland and Labrador	10.0	20.0	2.8	8.0
Prince Edward Island	1.8	19.1	0.9	9.7
Nova Scotia	12.0	17.9	5.7	9.3
New Brunswick	8.6	15.4	4.5	9.2

Quebec	84.3	17.4	60.1	11.9
Ontario	114.2	14.7	74.8	9.1
Manitoba	12.5	16.1	9.9	13.0
Saskatchewan	10.4	16.3	7.3	10.7
Alberta	30.8	15.8	28.8	12.0
British Columbia	31.5	13.3	21.2	7.5

¹ Defined as 20 to 24 year olds without a high school diploma and not in school.

² Since the Labour Force Survey is a sample survey subject to some inherent error, particularly among smaller geographies, provincial dropout rates are averaged over 3-year periods. This is done to improve the confidence in the trend.

From Statistics Canada, 2009. Labour Force Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=3701&lang=en&db=imdb&adm=8&dis=2>

There seems to be a substantial difference in the dropout rates between some urban and rural areas in Canada. According to G. Bowlby (2005), the rate of dropping out is especially high in rural Alberta and Quebec and fairly high in Manitoba. In both rural Alberta and Quebec, the dropout rate was approximately 1 in 5 for those in the 20–24 age group. Bowlby indicated that there is a great discrepancy between the dropout rates between the rural and urban areas and cities in Alberta. For instance, in small towns and rural areas the dropout rate was 17% and 21.7% respectively, whereas in the metropolitan areas it was 9.9% (Bowlby).

Provincial Dropout Rate

In Alberta, it is estimated that approximately one in four students who starts high school do not graduate (Alberta Education, 2008). Recent provincial statistics reveal that

high school completion rates have remained relatively constant over the last 5 years (see Table 3).

Table 3. Alberta High School Completion Rates

	2003		2004		2005		2006		2007	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
3 yr completion	43,373	67.8	43,222	69.3	43,032	70.4	43,930	70.4	44,661	71.0
4 yr completion	42,679	72.3	43,346	73.4	43,192	75.1	43,013	76.2	43,913	76.3
5 yr completion	42,099	75.2	42,636	75.5	43,318	77.4	43,174	78.6	42,987	79.5

From Alberta Education, 2008, "Accountability Pillar Results for Annual Education Results Report (AERR)." Retrieved from www.education.alberta.ca/media/852263/provincialaprresults2008.pdf

According to Alberta Education (2008), the high school completion rate (in 3 years) was 71.0% in 2007. The completion rate has remained relatively constant since 2003–2005, when the average was 69.1% (Alberta Education, 2008). Students in Alberta were considered to be high school completers if they had met the requirement to receive a high school diploma or equivalent within the tracking period of 5 years after entering Grade 10. Those who were not enrolled in school or a high school completer were therefore considered to be early school leavers.

The Alberta government also calculates the rate of school leaving and returning to school for Alberta students aged 14 to 18 for each academic year. The results are the annual dropout and returning rate. Dropouts are those students who are not registered in the education system (which includes K-12, postsecondary, or apprenticeship program) and who have not completed the requirement for a high school diploma from the previous year (i.e., if 2005–2006 is the year of interest, the rate from that year would be those students who dropped out in the 2004–2005 school year). For the 2004–2005 school year, the dropout rate was calculated at 5%. Of those who dropped out, 21.4% returned to school within one year (Alberta Education, 2008).

The United States

According to Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman (2006), using data from the U.S. Department of Educational Statistics, the percentage of dropouts among 16 to 24 year olds declined from 14% in 1977 to 10% in 2004. Laird, Lew, DeBell, and Chapman (2006) used data from the annual Current Population Survey (CPS), the annual Common Core Data (CCD) and the Annual GED Testing Service (GEDTS) in order to determine the dropout situation in the United States through the 2002–2003 school year.

There are numerous ways one can collect, calculate, and report rates of dropping out and completion. Laird et al. (2006) indicated four ways the dropout and completion rates are commonly calculated: the event dropout rate, the status dropout rate, the status completion rate, and the average freshman completion rate. Each provides valuable information, with inherent strengths and weaknesses, in determining the scope of the

dropout situation in the United States. These are presented here, along with some of the statistics they yield.

First, the event dropout rate

estimates the percentage of both private and public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent (e.g., a General Educational Development certificate, or GED). It can be used to track annual changes in the experiences of students in the U.S. school system. (Laird et al., 2006, p. 1)

In 2002–2003, 4% of students who were enrolled in October 2002 had left school by October 2003 without having met the requirements for a high school diploma. Using this data, one can see a downward trend in the event dropout rate. The event dropout rate fell from 6.1% in 1972 to 4% in 2003. However, there has been no significant overall increase or decrease in the event dropout rate since 1991 (Laird et al., 2006). In 2002–2003 there were no differences in the event dropout rate between males and females. In the same year there were significant differences in the dropout rate among ethnic groups, with Hispanic students being more likely to drop out than Caucasian or Asian students. The event dropout rate was not significantly different for African American students or for those who indicated more than one race. However, there were significant differences found for family income.

In 2003, those living in low-income families were 5 times more likely than those in high income families to drop out. Since 1990, event dropout rates have

fluctuated between 3.6 and 5.7 percent for middle-income students and between 1.0 and 2.7 percent for high-income students, event dropout rates increased from 9.5 percent in 1990 to 13.3 percent in 1995 and then declined to 7.5 percent in 2003. (Laird et al., 2006, p. 4)

Older students were more likely to drop out than younger students. For instance in the 2002–2003 reference year, 2.5% of 15–16 year olds and 2.95% of 17 year olds dropped out compared with 5.7% of 19 year olds and 20.8% of 20–24 year olds (Laird et al., 2006).

Second, the status dropout rate reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school and who have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when they dropped out. The rate focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues. (Laird et al., 2006, p. 1)

The U.S. national status dropout rate shows a decline from 14.6% in 1972 to 9.9% in 2003 among those 16 to 24 years of age. “Males aged 16–24 were more likely than females to be high school drop outs” in 2003, 11.3% compared with 8.4% respectively (Laird et al., 2006, p. 6). For Caucasians, the rate fell from 12.3% in 1972 to 6.3% in 2003, and the rates for African Americans fell from 21.3% to 10.9% in the same time period. For Hispanic students, the rate fell from 34.3% in 1972 to 23.5% in 2003.

Interestingly, in 2003, 39.4% of Hispanics in the 16–24 year old age group, born outside

the United States, were dropouts. Those of Hispanic origin that were born in the U.S. were less likely to drop out than those who immigrated to the U.S. (Laird et al., 2006).

Third, the status completion rate

indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in high school and who have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when the credential was earned. The rate focuses on an overall age as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues. (Laird et al., 2006, p. 2)

According to Laird et al. (2006), in 2003, 87.1% of 18 to 24 year olds not enrolled in high school had received a high school diploma or equivalency. The completion rate has increased since 1972 from 82.8% to 85.6% in 1990 to 87.1% in 2003. Males in the 18–24 age group were less likely (85.1%) than females (89.2%) to have completed high school (Laird et al., 2006). Asian/Pacific Islanders had the highest completion rate (94.9%) in 2003, followed by Caucasians (91.9%), African Americans (85%), and Hispanic (69.2%) in the 18–24 age group (Laird et al., 2006).

Fourth, the average freshman graduation rate

estimates the proportion of high school freshman who graduate with a regular diploma 4 years after starting 9th grade. The rate focuses on public high school students as opposed to all high school students or the general population and is designed to provide an estimate of on-time graduation from high school. Thus, it provides a measure of the extent to which public high schools are graduating students within the expected period of four years. (Laird et al., 2006, p. 2)

For public school students in the class 2002–2003, the average freshman graduation rate was 73.9 % (Laird et al., 2006), compared to 72.6% in 2001–2002.

Australia

The school system in Australia is similar to that in Canada and the United States. Schooling in Australia starts with a year of preparatory school followed by 12 years in primary and secondary school. In the final year, year 12, students can study for a government-endorsed certificate that is recognized by all the Australian Universities and Colleges as well as many international universities.

One type of statistic that is reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2006) is the apparent retention rate. This is the number of school students in a certain year (in percentage) of their cohort, which is either at the commencement of their secondary school or at year 10, who make it to year 12 of secondary school (ABS, 2006). In 2005, the “apparent full-time retention rate” from year 7–8 to year 12 was 75.3%. This is down from 75.7% in 2004 but up from the rate of 72.2% in 1995 (ABS, 2006). In 2005 the retention rate was significantly higher for girls than for boys (81% to 69.9%, respectively).

One of the largest Australian studies that analyzed school leaving in Australia is the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). This study follows students in Australia and their transitions through school to postsecondary education and into the workplace. It includes samples of a number of cohorts in order to analyze the movement of youths within Australia. Many reports have been published from this data. Of

particular interest is a report written by McMillan and Marks (2003), which focuses on the cohort of youths who were in their ninth year in 1995 and who were followed until the year 2000.

McMillan and Marks (2003) describe their conception of school leavers (see Figure 2). In their study, a non-completer is a student who left school before completing Grade 12. They then further subdivide non-completers into early school leavers (those who leave before the completion of year 10) and later school leavers (those who leave after starting Grade 11 but before completing Grade 12).

According to these definitions of school leavers, McMillan and Marks (2003) determined that

approximately 9 per cent of the cohort are classified as early school leavers, a further 13 per cent are classified as later school leavers, 41 per cent are classified as school completers who had not entered higher education, and 38 per cent are classified as school completers who entered higher education in the year after Year 12 or in the following year. (p. 8)

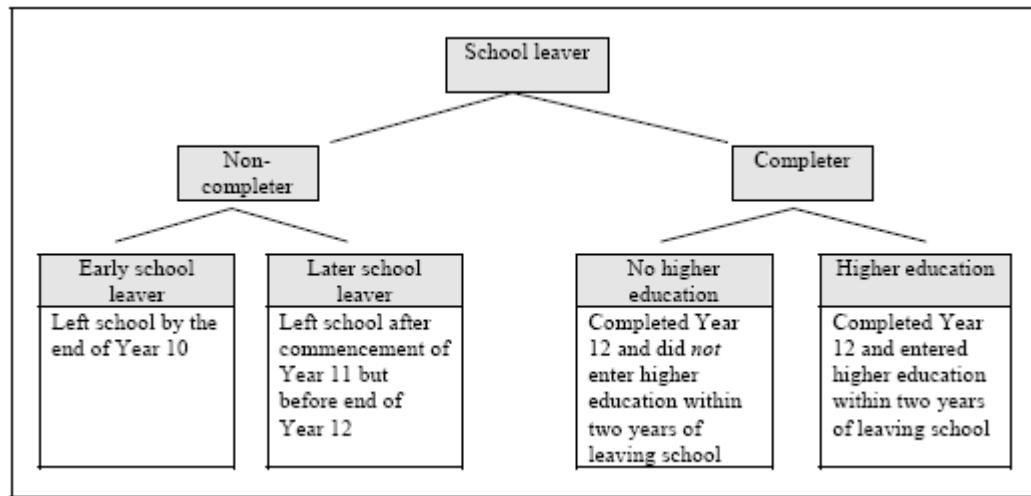


Figure 2. Categories of school leavers. From J. McMillan and G. N. Marks, “School Leavers in Australia: Profiles and Pathways,” 2003. *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (LSAY Research Reports No. 31, p. 7). Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

New Zealand

Another country that has a similar education system to that of Canada is New Zealand. The New Zealand Education System, like those in Canada, United States, and Australia, is comprised of primary, intermediate, and secondary schooling. However, New Zealand secondary school starts at year 9 and ends with the completion of year 13 (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005). Therefore, dropping out of school would be defined as leaving before completing 4 years of high school as opposed to three as it is in Canada, Australia, and the United States.

According to a report from the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2005), the percentage of people who left school without receiving a high school qualification was 13%. In New Zealand, certain students tend to have higher dropout rates than others, such as Maori students. The Maori are the indigenous peoples of New Zealand and, according to the 2001 New Zealand census, make up close to 15% of the population. The report indicates that when analyzing the highest level of attainment of the population, Maori students were more likely to have “little or no formal attainment” (25% compared to 13% for New Zealand as a whole). It was noted, however, that the rate of high school completion seems to be improving, and those without high school completion seem to be on the decline for the population as a whole as well as for Maori students.

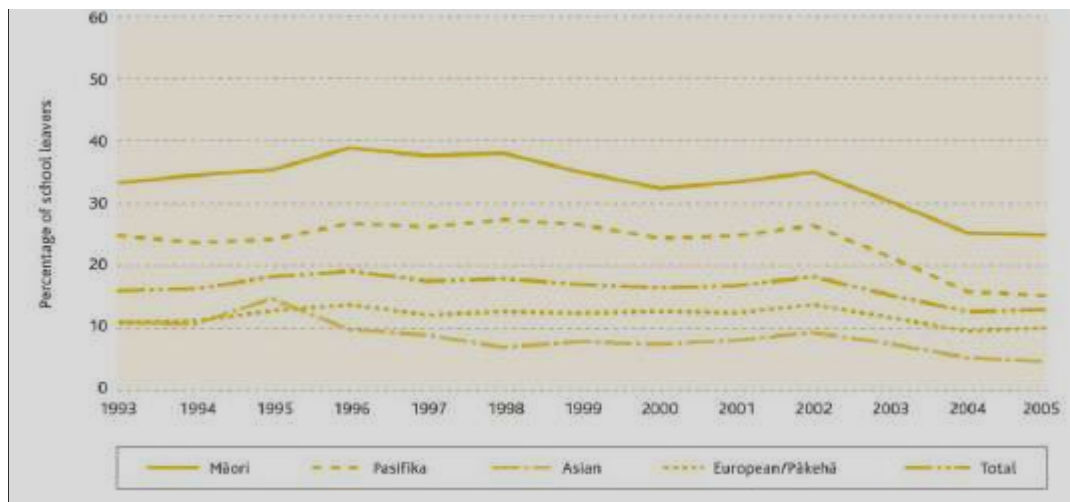


Figure 3. Percentage of school leavers in New Zealand with little or no formal attainment by ethnic group, 1993–2005. From *New Zealand Schools: A Report on the Compulsory Schools Sector in New Zealand*, 2005, p. 19, Auckland: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

Framing Early School Leavers

No one framework has been developed that is able to capture the complexity of early school leaving. In general, students at risk of early school leaving are viewed from either an individual deficit perspective that elaborates risk factors, or from disengagement perspectives, which take into account wider social inequities (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

Individual Deficit Model (Risk Factors)

The individual deficit model relies on simple, causal attribution of risk factors and sees both the individual and family as the primary cause of early school leaving. Early school leavers and their families are seen as a homogenous group, despite increasing evidence that school leaving is a complex and multivariate process. Schools are seen as unable to prevent early school leaving and, in general, both institutional and societal problems are ignored. Knesting (2008) noted that understanding the problem of early school leaving “requires going beyond the limited scope of individual student characteristics to include school factors in students’ decisions to leave or stay in school” (p. 3).

Trends with Dropouts

The research suggests that there is no typical dropout. Many factors seem to interact in the decision to drop out, and dropping out can be seen as more of a process than an event. There is much research that illuminates trends in those who drop out of high school in Canada. J. W. Bowlby and McMullen (2002) use YITS data to compare

dropouts and graduates on various characteristics. For instance, those who had graduated high school were twice as likely to have at least one parent who had completed postsecondary education (56.6% vs. 27.9%, respectively). Dropouts were also more likely than graduates to have parents who had not completed high school (26.9% vs. 8.7%). In terms of grades, high school dropouts were more likely to have lower overall grade averages and were more likely to have overall grades under 60% than were graduates. However, not all of the dropouts in the sample had low grades. Half of the dropouts had a B average or better and an additional third had C average or better. It was indicated that only 3.6% of dropouts had academic averages that fell below 50% (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002).

Another factor that is indicative of future risk of dropping out is repetition of a grade. According to J. W. Bowlby and McMullen (2002), dropouts were five times more likely to have repeated a grade in high school and boys were more likely than girls to have repeated a grade. Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) investigated the relationship between grade retention and dropping out of high school by doing a literature review of studies of high school drop out. They located 17 studies that met the criteria for their study and addressed the issue of grade retention and high school drop out. The results indicate that grade retention can be one of the most powerful predictors of high school drop out.

“When you are eighteen years old and you’re in a classroom of grade ten’ers you just can’t handle the garbage that goes on in school. I couldn’t handle being in a class

with a bunch of immature people” (Participant, cited in Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995, p. 51).

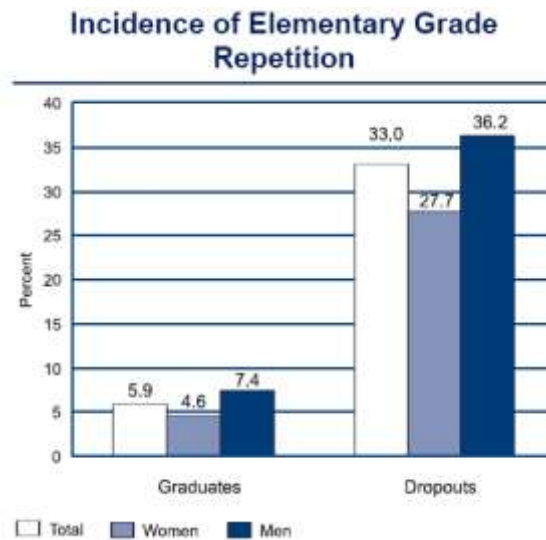


Figure 4. Comparison of dropouts and graduates on elementary grade retention by gender. From *At a Crossroads: First Results for the 18- to 20-Year-Old Cohort of the Youth in Transition Survey* (p. 34), by J. W. Bowlby and K. McMullen, 2002. Ottawa, ON: Human Resources Canada, Statistics Canada.

Another major factor often cited as being strongly related to high school dropping out is that of working while in high school. J. W. Bowlby and McMullen (2002) indicated that, of the entire sample surveyed, 61.5% of students worked for pay while 38.5% did not. Dropout rates were lowest among youths who worked a moderate number of hours during the week. Bushnik (2003) used YITS data to investigate the relationships of

working while in high school to leaving school without obtaining a high school diploma. Bushnik indicated that the “highest proportion of students to drop out were those who worked greater than 30 hours per week followed by those students that did not work at all” (p. 11).

Dropouts tended to have more negative behaviors, such as skipping classes, than high school graduates. They were also more likely than graduates to have friends with few educational aspirations (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002).

One of the major issues related to high school dropping out is that of engagement. Finn and Rock (1997) sampled minority students from low-income families. Students were classified as either successful school completers, school completers with poor academic performance or non-completers. The groups were compared in terms of psychological characteristics as well as engagement behaviors. The study uses Finn’s (1989) taxonomy of engagement or participatory behaviors. Finn argued that with participation comes identification with school and a sense of belonging, which promotes a feeling of self-worth.

Norris, Pignal, and Lipps (2003) discussed the measurement of school engagement; although their sample was elementary students, the findings still have relevance to the issues of engagement. They defined school engagement as “children’s behavioral involvement in and emotional identification with the social and academic realms of school” (p. 27). They also differentiated between academic engagement and social engagement. Academic engagement involves interaction with teachers, the curriculum, and school governance, whereas social engagement refers to the out-of-

classroom aspects of school life such as relationships with peers and extracurricular activities. More engaged students are less alienated from school and have a high academic achievement.

Research from the YITS (18–20 year old group) indicates that dropouts tend to be less engaged than graduates. To measure school engagement among the 15-year-old cohort included in the YITS, researchers asked students various questions related to their level of identification with the school, the social aspect of school, and academic aspects of school life (Bushnik, Barr-Telford, & Bussiere, 2004). It was found that those students who had dropped out by age 17 were less engaged at age 15 than those who had not dropped out. Approximately 26% of dropouts reported not being very socially engaged, and 39% reported they were not very academically engaged. Only 49% of dropouts participated in extra curricular activities (at age 15) while in school, whereas 66% of those who continued and graduated were involved in extra curricular activities.

Risk Factors – Clusters

By looking at the extensive risk factors gleaned from the literature (see Appendix A), one can see that the high school dropout problem is far from one in which a student simply decides to leave school without a diploma. Generally, it appears that students who drop out are likely to be those who are unmotivated by their class work; who have problems with either the school authorities, the police, or both; who skip classes or are often absent; who are pregnant or married; who are poor and must work; who have family problems; or who have drug or alcohol problems (F. W. Lee & Ip, 2003).

Although these are likely very salient contributing factors, the high school dropout phenomenon is extremely complex.

The at-risk factors for early school leaving can be loosely categorized into several strands such as social factors, socio-political-economic factors, school related characteristics, and family characteristics. By far the largest category is that of personal characteristics of the student. Although there is some indication of who drops out, as just discussed above, it is likely many of these factors contribute to leaving school without a diploma, a process that may vary depending on grade level (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Critique of Risk Factors

Although some key factors have been identified that likely are related and assist in predicting who is at risk of dropping out, these lists may not be that helpful in predicting who will drop out. The purpose of identifying risk factors in the first place is to give administrators and educators a way of identifying those who may need intervention in order to keep them in school. Research on risk factors that lead to early school leaving may represent a starting point for understanding the complexity of the dropout process (Lessard et al., 2008). However, an important question is how beneficial are risk factors in actually predicting who will eventually drop out of school? Gleason and Dynarski (2002) investigated middle school students and looked at which risk factors were effective in predicting who would eventually drop out of high school. They investigated five types of commonly identified risk factor categories each with various commonly reported risk factors contained within. The risk factor categories are (a)

demographic characteristics and family background, (b) past school performance, (c) personal/ psychological characteristics, (d) adult responsibilities, and (e) school or neighborhood characteristics. Their results indicated that the factors associated with the highest dropout rates were high absenteeism and being overage by two or more years. However, none of the single risk factors contained within the above categories effectively predicted future dropouts. Three fourths of the students identified as at risk of dropping out were not dropouts 2 to 3 years later. Therefore, although risk factors assist in identifying those who may drop out, they are not as effective as one would hope. Gleason and Dynarski concluded that when our risk factors are ineffective in predicting who will drop out, intervention programs will end up serving those who would not have dropped out and missing those who eventually do drop out.

Some researchers have even tried to categorize certain characteristics into types of dropouts. For instance, Kronick and Hargis (1990) suggest three types of dropouts: the low-achiever pushouts, the quiet dropout, and the in-school dropouts. Each of these categories has specific characteristics. The low-achiever pushouts are those students who experience repeated academic failures and react to these failures through aggressiveness and misbehavior. The misbehavior often leads to reprimands and sanctions from school and only ends when the student eventually becomes expelled. The quiet dropout is listed as a frequent dropout type by Kronick and Hargis. The quiet dropout may have a history of academic failure but does not act out in the manner in which the low-achiever pushout reacts. The quiet dropout does not externalize the frustration. Due to the lack of outward indicators that there is a difficulty, these individuals may go unnoticed until the time of

drop out. The in-school dropouts are those students who remain in school until the graduation year but, before graduation, fail the final exams due to deficiencies in their knowledge. Although these categories may be useful for categorizing some of the students who have dropped out, they may not be useful as they do not account for certain characteristics known to be related to drop out such as family experiences, school related factors, and socioeconomic status.

Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (2000) endeavored to empirically explore the value of using a typological approach to prevent and study school drop out. The variables used to develop the typology were based on individual school experience characteristics, such as school grades, grade retention, commitment to schooling, attitude towards schooling, level of stress in school, disciplinary sanctions, involvement in school and extra curricular activities, and school misbehavior, to name a few. The results of the study led to four categories: quiet dropouts, disengaged dropouts, low achiever dropouts, and maladjusted dropouts. The quiet dropouts are those that do not misbehave in school, demonstrate moderate to high levels of commitment to school, are usually involved in school activities, do not require disciplinary sanctions, have positive views about school attendance, and can have somewhat low achievement. The quiet dropouts appear to be fairly good students overall except for lower achievement. The disengaged dropouts are those that display some school misbehavior, have a low commitment to school, feel they are less competent than their peers, do not like school, care little for grades and have few educational aspirations, and demonstrate average academic performance. The low achiever dropouts are those who have a weak commitment to education and have some

school misbehavior, but their defining characteristic is that they have very low school performance. These students often have difficulties meeting the requirements to pass their courses. The maladjusted dropouts are those individuals with poor academic performance, weak commitment to school, and a high level of school misbehavior. This type of dropout obviously has the most negative profile of the four listed. The quiet dropouts and the maladjusted dropouts are said to be the two most common types of dropouts (Janosz et al., 2000).

The utility of classifying dropouts has some strength in terms of assisting researchers and educators in being aware of the etiology of the dropout. It also draws attention to the necessity of further inquiry into those classified as quiet dropouts, as these students are usually not identified as being at-risk. They seem like good students and thus go unnoticed until the point when they decide to drop out completely. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) also found “that the sources of [students’] progressive disengagement from school did not lie in the accumulation of risk factors” (p. 221).

Process Theories of Disengagement

Although individual deficit models continue to be explored, process theories of disengagement have become more common. These theories take into account that disengagement from school is a nonlinear, partial and fragmented process that is often contradictory, complex, filled with subversive forces and tensions, as well as a struggle for most students (Archambault et al., 2009; SickKids, 2005; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). Hodgson (2007) described school leaving as “having complex

historical antecedents that form and grow over time” (pp. 1–2). Points of disengagement have been referred to as starting points, faltering points, and end points. At times, students start from scratch; these are students who have multiple risk factors at the family, school, and community level. Other students have primarily protective factors, and, after leaving school early, they still see the possibility of negotiating their way back to school. The in-between students have a mix of both risk and protective factors (SickKids, 2005).

Dropping out is not just an event but rather a process (Bradshaw, O’Brennan, & McNeely, 2008). It is not just a matter of deciding not to come back to school one day. According to J. W. Bowlby and McMullen (2002), many youths drop out and return to school several times before leaving school completely. Of the youths surveyed in the YITS, 59.6% of dropouts reported having left school at least one time before actually dropping out, 18.9% had left twice, and 6.3% had left three or more times. Students also had a variety of reasons for leaving: most cited school-related reasons (41.7%); others reported work-related reasons (27.3%), personal reasons (16.9%), and other reasons (14.1%). One of the main reasons for dropping out of school was being bored or uninterested (19.9% of dropouts) (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002).

Men were more likely than women (33.7% to 16.8%) to indicate that the main reason they left school was work. Of the men in this group, 19.8% indicated that they “wanted to work,” but 13.95% indicated that they “had to work due to money problems” (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). To the contrary, females were more likely (29.1%) than males (16.9%) to report personal or family reasons for dropping out of high school.

Out of all female dropouts in their survey, 15.9% indicated that the reason for leaving school was due to being pregnant or to caring for their own child (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen).

At times, dropping out can be related to the number of times a student has school-related sanctions coupled with low achievement (Arcia, 2006). Suspended students had substantially lower pre-suspension achievements than did students in the comparison group, gained considerably less academically throughout 3 years with suspensions, and had high dropout rates. All patterns were considerably more marked with increases in suspensions and with decreases in achievement (Arcia, 2006).

When students were asked to reflect on their decision to drop out of high school, “45.9% were ‘sorry’ they had, and 29.6% had ‘mixed feelings’ regarding their decision to drop out”; “females were more likely than their male counterparts to have regretted their decision to drop out” (J. W. Bowlby & McMullen, 2002, p. 42).

Recently, Lessard and colleagues (2008) described how some factors influence the process of dropping out. In their qualitative study of the lived experiences of dropouts, Lessard et al. outlined three elements of this process as *setting the stage*, *teetering*, and *ending the journey*. Dropout participants described strategies to *prolong their journey* and strategies to *sabotage it*. Apt metaphors such as *teetering* (Lessard et al., 2008) and *winnowing* (Hodgson, 2007) describe the gradual but continuous process of moving in and out of school. T. Lee and Breen (2007) identified three phases of the early school leaving process as encompassing *exclusion from school*, *transition to the work force* and the “*now*” phase. Participants described negative experiences in school that led

to explicit or implicit exclusion, which in turn led them to seek alternatives outside schooling and to finding full-time work. They then described their current satisfaction or contentment to live with their decisions.

Critical Approaches to Disengagement

A key historical shift occurred in the late 1980s when researchers recognized the potential impacts of the environment on early school leavers. They argued that in order to understand early school leavers it was important that their behavior was framed as a reaction to cultural needs and aspirations. Early school leavers are impacted by the school context, structures, and norms, and their decision is often the end result of a longstanding struggle and various decisive moments along the pathway (Munns & McFadden, 2000). A flow chart (see Appendix B) highlights the multiple influences and experiences that ultimately lead to the tactical maneuver of a student to completely disengage from school. Early school leaving is situated within the school context, as well as in a social-cultural context, and is explored from a perspective of identity formation. Sefa Dei (2008) also draws our attention to schooling as community, where education must cultivate a sense of identity within community and culture.

School Context

Rhythms In and Out of School – Continuous Moving

I don't know, I always felt I was kind of trapped at school, you know, trapped in this one little stream where I had to go along and do it and I couldn't get out and live my life. (Participant, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 79)

Some early school leavers describe their experiences as a feeling of being trapped in a narrowly defined identity story. Others describe it as a dropout dance, a dance in which they both flex their muscles and perform, as a way to exert power over their own choices (Davis, 2006). Frequently, these students move in and out of school and their school stories are marked by repeated absences. The rhythms of moving in and out of school are filled with signifiers of rejection, even if the goals of school leavers and those who eventually graduate remain the same (Tanner et al., 1995).

Early school leavers often move in and out of school for school related reasons, not necessarily because of cultural resistance. The themes of alienation and boredom are particularly strong, and some children and youths are able to endure this, while for others it leads to a continuous moving in and out of school, where the final decision to not return to school is most often ambiguous and tentative (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Tanner, 2001). T. Lee and Breen (2007) described exclusion from school as either explicit (isolated and ostracized) or implicit (bullying, gossip). Participants described themselves as being an "outcast" or "like prisoners" and that school was a barrier to achieving their goals rather than a way to achieve them as reasons why to leave school early.

On the other hand, many school policies and procedures encourage disciplinarians to use suspensions and transfers to “get rid of” students they deem troublemakers. Langhout and Mitchell (2008) described a *hidden curriculum* explained as the values, norms, and beliefs transmitted via the structure of schooling. Implicit messages are conveyed in school that are mired in race, ethnicity, social class, and gender issues. Academic disengagement can occur for all students but can be especially strong for disadvantaged youth when they learn a different message from the stated one. Implicit messages that their engagement was inappropriate and subsequently learning that school is not for them is heard. Similarly, Hodgson (2007) explained the unconscious school operation of separating, categorizing, and labeling students into various groupings can imply an exertion of power and control. The continuous moving of students in and out of school is seen as a mechanism through which schools help perpetuate racial and class stratification in the larger society (Bowditch, 1993). This is particularly so in the case of students with a history of criminal activity and students who are expelled from school due to troublesome and troubled behavior (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

It is also important to note that the turbulence in the lives of children caused by residential mobility, school staff and peer turnover, and other elements of instability contributes to early school leaving (Hanna, 2003; Terry, 2008).

Voices In and Outside of School

Some teachers were really nice and understanding and did their best to try and help me catch up, but one teacher held it [my suspension] against me and called

me a ‘waste of space’ and that I was taking up space in the classroom.

(Participant, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 388)

Voices both in and outside of school contribute to students leaving school prior to graduation. Some students are exposed to continuous remarks that clearly indicate that they are not welcome at school. Peer rejection in school or negative influences of peers outside of school can play a large part in why students leave school (Lessard et al., 2008; Terry, 2008). On other occasions it is that people outside of school do not acknowledge the relevance of the school experience for students, which leads to a feeling of being misunderstood or not being recognized at all. Family and friends have profound influences over students’ decisions to leave school. Lack of parental support and unsupportive attitudes actively encourage students to quit. In a study by Terry, examples of unsupportive behavior include repeatedly being uprooted and moved or having family turmoil due to divorce or drug and alcohol use.

Unquestioned Assumptions

“We did not like to go to school. It was useless and boring. We just went to school because our parents wanted us to do so and we don’t know the meaning”

(Participant, cited in Lee & Ip, 2003, p. 103).

In the current socioeconomic and political climate, schools often operate from a one-size-fits-all approach. This is evident in standardized testing, as well as in school resources and the provision of career advice given in schools (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Fine & Weis, 2003). Schools neither attend to nor question issues of inequality or

unequal distribution of resources and needs; schools are breeding grounds for competition, where everyone competes against everyone and students are often troubled by the assumption of sameness. Schools create a horizon of im/possibility and un/desirability (Archer & Yamashita, 2003).

Schools rarely question their own assumptions and learning environments and often children contemplate: “Like most kids at school are there because they just don’t know what else to do. And the school just doesn’t allow that independence” (Participant, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 391). These seem to be the inexorable pathologies of the current school and government bureaucracy (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). More recently, Smyth and Fasoli (2007) stated that it is no easy task to reform schools to be less punitive and thus reinvent themselves to show students that schooling is relevant and worthwhile. Developing respectful relationships with students, parents, and community was essential for positive outcomes to happen, otherwise a “spiraling culture of worthlessness and hopelessness would likely to persist” (p. 280).

Mismatch Between Education and Schooling

They had me going a little bit. That’s what made me go for a couple of months, but the teachers there never did hands on training. They’d always stick to the books, and the books just put me to sleep. I’d just get tired. I was there for three months, and we never worked on anything. We just sat there with our books. My father’s a mechanic, so I know something about mechanics, and I like it. But, since we never did anything, it never caught my attention. I could stay home and

work with my dad on cars and learn more. (Participant, cited in Jeffries, Nix, & Singer, 2002, p. 42)

The mismatch between education and schooling is well expressed in the students' accounts of their early school leaving experience, many of them indicating that attending school is often not about education but about attaining a certificate. In many cases students felt they did not learn anything or, at least, anything that was relevant to, or would help them improve, their lives. Lessard et al. (2008) described situations where students felt like they were "walking in the dark." Participants described how going through the motions of school was confusing to them and failed to link the educational journey with their futures. Similarly, Harris (2008) noted that until teachers are aware that the students see purpose behind schooling and class work, they are unlikely to engage and fail to see the relevance of learning.

Positions of Power

The school favors students who perform well in examinations. It can help the school build up its reputation. We are bad students, since we perform badly academically. Teachers are willing to spend time with good students to drill their examination skills after class. They would never spend time with us to discuss things taught by them we don't understand. (Participant, cited in Lee & Ip, 2003, p. 101)

The issue of power within schools, particularly between teachers and students and between administrators and students, has received little attention. Yet, schools could be

understood from a notion of schools as spaces of regulated confrontation. From this stance schools are seen as places where teacher and student (counter)scripts intersect in often less than authentic forms of interaction (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). Indeed, these often inauthentic relationships are filled with power struggles that reflect not only when teachers and students engage, but also when teachers and students do not engage.

Langhout and Mitchell (2008) described how the power dynamic favors the schools and teachers in a system “where the teacher is the police, judge and jury” (p. 605).

Teachers sometimes reflect the notion that schools become sorting stations in children’s lives, and that those who do well are both rewarded and helped to become somebody. The educational powerlessness and the social disadvantage that accompanies many students of cultural difference are used to push students out of school. This particularly holds true for Aboriginal students (Munns & McFadden, 2000), “but they get pushed away because they don’t have what the other kids do” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 87). Smyth and Fasoli (2007) described relational power when referring to the inequalities of allocating resources, such as who gets provided the necessary resources to succeed in school. Related to the notion of social capital, disadvantaged children may not have a say or any power and thus become less trusting of the school system.

Other times students who feel that teachers are not interested in them and do not care much about them, find themselves in what Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine (1997) referred to as a “network of disinterest,” with detrimental emotional and cognitive effects (Hay et al., 2004). Lowered teacher expectations combined with some encouragement to opt out of mainstream education also leads to a pushing out of students, or perhaps a

facilitating out of students (Davison Aviles, 1999). Students often do not have a choice about the school they would like to attend, leading to a feeling of powerlessness and being stuck.

You know, it's like going to the job where you work and you hate your job. Every chance you get to leave that job, you will leave. And there's nothing that we can do ... The difference between us going to school and having a job is you can quit and find another job. This school – we can not go anywhere else ... then you get stuck going to a school like this and you're just not learning. (Participant, cited in Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 110)

In the current era of high-stakes testing, it has also been noted that educators and students are under great pressure to increase students' academic performance; failure on the students' part to perform well often leads to a feeling of deficit among “low” achieving groups (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). Students not only are then exposed to an uninspiring pedagogy but also are made responsible for their failure. These discourses, practices, and policies indicate an area of new authoritarianism (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, 2002; Hodgson, 2007). Early school leavers often cite this authoritarianism as a reason for leaving. As well, they resist schools that are seen as embodying the essence of capitalist society (Munns & McFadden, 2000). Hodgson (2007) states “the way power operates in schools to produce particular kinds of cultures and identities and how these are resisted, reconstructed and bypassed by some students can lead to increased pessimism and loss of faith in school as a legitimate place to be” (p. 13).

Relational Being

If you don't enjoy the people you hang around with, you can't, you don't want to learn so you just leave, you know. If you don't, you know, if you're going to school and getting hassled out and you've got no-one to talk to or ... then you won't have a good time so you won't stay there. (Participant, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 83)

School personnel often fail to connect with the lives and worlds of students they are meant to engage with (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Often there is little time, amidst the administration of tests and the attention to individual characteristics, to engage with students. A report by the Ministry of Learning in Alberta (cited in Hay et al., 2004) identified issues such as negative teacher-student interaction and low teacher expectations as strong factors contributing to students dropping out of school. Feeling valued by available, open-minded, and patient teachers helped prolong the educational journey for some students (Lessard et al., 2008). While outright school failure is not particularly significant in early school leaving, the relationships with teachers, feelings of boredom, and an irrelevant curriculum, matter deeply (Tanner et al., 1995). As described by one of the researchers, "Melanie described feeling like a number among thousands without faces and without connections. She expressed feeling lost in the large student body once her few close friends were no longer there" (Jeffries et al., 2002, p. 41). Similarly, others talked about living invisibly by not wanting to attract attention and not being counted (Lessard et al., 2008).

Being Different in Schools/Continuous Rubbing Up

School is certainly not about being different or being given a voice or expressing opposition, as schools often legitimize and reproduce large structured inequalities and silence students (Fine & Weis, 2003). Students can be explicitly or implicitly excluded from an education, simply because they were made to feel that they did not deserve it, because they did not fit the perception of a “normal” or ideal student (Lessard et al., 2008).

Clearly, the wider power of school relations has some measure in shaping identity and aspiration, but equally, young people also bring their own indigenous cultures and sensibilities to what they are prepared to accept, and this may not always be consistent with the school’s agenda of making them “obedient and subordinate citizens.” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 380)

Unfortunately, these often happen to be students who choose to leave school early (Choi, 2005). Schools often position students in terms of class and gender and limit the discussion of their aspirations based on these categories. The issue of poverty is largely silenced in schools, so that students from less than middle-class backgrounds feel alienated (Hattam & Smyth, 2003). Expecting middle class backgrounds also leads to a narrowly constructed identity story of children (Fine & Weis, 2003).

Social-Cultural Contexts

Policies

Current government policies often see young people as human capitalists rather than socially and culturally embedded characters. Policy makers treat education as a technical rational choice, further ignoring the larger, complex life stories of youths. Trying to compose a story of school engagement has to be understood in light of these policies (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000).

Consumer Culture

More than in any previous period of history, teenagers now spend more time among their peers, leading to an unprecedented aged-based social segregation. When examining the school leaving story of Korean youths, Choi (2005) found that it became clear that the Korean consumer culture

evoked these youths' consumer desires and accelerated disengagement from school. The youths were vulnerable to an environment that solicited their money such as game rooms, Internet cafes, dance halls, bars and taverns. In this culture money became a yardstick to measure the worth of a person. (p. 309)

The combination of economic dependence and age segregation offers an unappealing combination of a subordinate status, and all its anxieties, with an intensified reliance on peer approval (Davies, 1999). T. Lee and Breen (2007) described social networking changes when students drop out and how all ties to friends were broken by the decision to leave school early.

Social Issues

I miss a lot of school but it's not because I want to. I miss school when I'm needed at home. I try to help out as much as I can, especially now that my dad's been laid off. Last year, Mom was sick and she called the school and they came and told me. I ran to my locker and grabbed everything and I ran out. I just ran out. If my mom needs me I'll come running home. (Olafson, 2006, p. 32)

In general there is an underestimation of the demands of private life for students, especially for those living in poverty and those who have experienced family turmoil (Hattam & Smyth, 2003; Lessard et al., 2008; Terry, 2008). Many opportunities in life are classed (Ball et al., 2000) and reflect the existing social structures. Some researchers have drawn attention to the societal barriers to achievement and attainment, particularly as it is reinforced and reproduced within the school system (Tanner et al., 1995).

Furthermore, the focus on young peoples' transitions to adulthood has failed to take account of fundamental shifts in social and economic relations, which affect both young and old people (Ball et al., 2000). It is critical to note that current social conditions are rapidly changing for youths, which affects their decisions of early school leaving (Davies, 1999). These issues have not been well addressed, and silences exist, particularly regarding the role of leisure and pleasure in the lives of young people (Ball et al., 2000).

Community

I don't get with the program because then it's doing what they [teachers] want for my life. I see mexicanos who follow the program so they can go to college, get rich, move out of the barrio, and never return to give back to their gente (people). Is that what this is all about? If I get with the program, I'm saying that's what it's all about and that teachers are right when they're not. (Participant, cited in Weis & Fine, 2005, p. 93)

Children and youths are strongly shaped by the communities they come from. At times, obtaining educational achievements rarely encountered in the community leads to the possible alienation of students in their own homes. At other times, community members disapprove of certain programs because they are not comfortable with the program, for example, being embarrassed that their children attend special classes (Davison Aviles, 1999).

Identity Formation

Many adolescents live a story of being disaffected by school and struggle to gain even a minimal education from their school experience, with the result that many leave school disillusioned (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). School for some also becomes an alienating and irrelevant experience, and some of these children develop an oppositional frame of reference for their identity (Choi, 2005; Smyth & Hattam, 2001).

I quit school because I enjoy freedom and fun-seeking with my friends ... I can see my friends for the whole day, talking, smoking, and playing in the playground

... even if we don't do anything, I enjoy freedom and companionship I get being with them. (Participant, cited in Lee & Ip, 2003, p. 105)

Once identities are inscribed at school by school failure and reputation, it is difficult to participate at school in the future (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). The scripting of an individual's life was sometimes initiated at school and at other times developed within a student's community. "Man, I never thought like that – I just hope to make it to the next day" are words from a young African American male, who described a limited life expectancy (Davis, 2006, p. 294).

It has to be recognized that young people have a heightened sense of agency and are often not prepared to have their identities ignored or subordinated within the dominant school and policy framework. School trouble often stems from the interactive trouble between trying to become somebody and the narrowly defined identity that schools expect (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). School policies, teacher attitudes and reactions, and peer rejection all provide the message that those who leave school early do not belong (Lessard et al., 2008). It is imperative that researchers and policy makers rethink the importance of context and its impact on students. T. Lee and Breen (2007) suggested opportunities for students to voice their needs and experience power and control.

Issues of identity and inequality surface for many students. At times an escape from learning has been interpreted as suggesting that learning identities have been used up. At other times early school leaving is an attempt to preserve already fragile and fragmented identities (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Ball et al., 2000). In the struggle to become somebody, early school leaving is a temporary improvisation (Ball et al., 2000).

Unfortunately, through increasing pressures at school, young people view themselves as not good enough and leave school (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). Leaving school, then, is a tactical maneuver amidst the complex process of identity formation (Hattam & Smyth, 2003).

Making the decision to leave school is part of the process of becoming someone. At other times employment or caring for others is seen as choosing more adult-like identities (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). “I felt like the world was spinning without me. A lot of the people I knew had jobs and they were going out and doing things and they had money” (Participant, cited in Tanner et al., 1995, p. 105). The performance of identities, expressed by fashion style and body image, helped some students stay in school while others were pushed out or excluded (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). For other students the process of success or even staying at school involved muting their voices (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). Particularly children from minority groups experienced the constructing of very limiting identities for them (Toohey, 2000).

Most of the teachers keep bugging me to get my work done. You have to do it their way, a certain way, and if you don't then you're just going to get punished for it. And it has to be done by a certain time. It just turns me off. Sometimes, I refuse to do the work. When they challenge me, I feel like I have to challenge them right back. It's my life, it's my school work. It just bugs me how they think they have control over our lives. (Participant, cited in Olafson, 2006, p. 41)

Issues and Directions for Future Research

Around the world, early school leaving is one of the most protracted educational problems, but also one of the least understood (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Throughout the literature review it was evident that a number of issues exist with the available statistical data as well as with the interpretation of the statistical data. Many areas remain unexamined or are largely unexplored in the current literature. In the following section, key issues are highlighted which point to directions for future research.

Primary Focus on Individual (Risk/Deficit Perspective)

Limited quantitative data exists that emphasizes and explores the complexities, resiliencies, and contexts of early school leavers' lives. The data that is collected is primarily gathered from individual risk and deficit perspectives. The early school leavers' survey conducted within Canada tends to reinforce the notion of individual deficits, pathologies, or inadequacies. The United States has focused predominately on breaking down data by race or ethnicity. Furthermore, very few studies examine their data from multiple perspectives (Orfield, 2004) or from theoretical perspectives. For the most part, quantitative research presents student groups as homogenous, neglecting the great diversity within these populations both in school attendance, achievement, and resources among other things (Feinstein & Peck, 2008).

School Leaving as a Point in Time Rather Than a Process

Most statistical studies delineate school leaving from a single point in time rather than from a process of disengagement. Consequently, most studies have not examined early school leaving from a longitudinal perspective (SickKids, 2005). Few studies have looked at the lives of early school leavers through the process of leaving school to transitioning to adulthood (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). Paying attention to this process over time could provide invaluable information into the connections between health and well-being and early school leaving. As well, problems relating to dropping out appear in the most acute form in the ninth grade, a critical transition for many students, yet most research on school leavers focuses on students in Grades 10 to 12 (Orfield, 2004).

No Coherent Framework for Early School Leaving Exists

School leaving has no clear definition or boundary; in fact, researchers use various and often unstated methods of determining leaver rates (SickKids, 2005). Researchers and school personnel often focus on societal and student characteristics to account for why some students make decisions to stay in or drop out of school. There are clear gaps and omissions in terms of who is selected for existing early school leaving studies. Research often ignores youths who withdraw prior to Grade 9, immigrants who never attend school, youths who attend private schools, and other groups such as youths in foster care (SickKids, 2005), despite the fact that others (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008) have shown that disengagement can start in elementary school. Schools may choose to

push out students in order to do well on achievement testing, yet no statistics account for the various reasons for early school leaving. There is a need to develop a universal definition of early school leaving (SickKids, 2005) which reflects the impact of school structure, size, and curriculum in relation to early school leavers, and in relation to the phenomena of push out and being facilitated out.

Missing Perspectives

Almost entirely missing in the attempt to understand the phenomena of early school leaving are the voices of school administrators, teachers, and parents. Only recently have studies emerged on teachers' conceptions of student engagement (Harris, 2008) and linking student and teacher experiences with student disengagement (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008). Given the relational nature of teachers' work, one must ask questions such as the following: How do teachers make sense of educational policies and school disciplinary practices that appear to be pushing their students out of school? How do teachers grapple with the aggressive promotion of the completion of Grade 12 with respect to early school leavers, in particular with regards to issues of equity and social exclusion (Taylor, 2002)?

Parents, too, play an important role in the lives of children, and no studies, either qualitative or quantitative, have examined parents' beliefs, attitudes, and understandings of early school leavers. Recognizing that students live amidst communities, some studies have examined community and cultural values that influence school leaving. However, this work is at the beginning stages.

No Consideration of Early School Leavers

in Context and Over Time

Very few studies focus on early school leavers and families in their particularity and over time. It has been established that family and friends have profound influences over students' decisions to leave school early, but few studies have explored the views of peer groups and families from this perspective. Yet, examining the experience of early school leaving in a larger sociocultural context would allow for a richer understanding of the issues and the phenomena. For instance, little attention has been paid to how diverse young people frame the issue of school leaving. Attention needs to be paid to subgroups such as lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered youths, Aboriginal youths, youths in rural areas, Francophone youths, first and second-generation immigrant youths, and visible minority youths and their understandings and experiences of early school leaving. School-based efforts to prevent early school leaving must address students' circles of influence, within in-school and out-of-school contexts.

It has also been clear that the labor market plays a role in the phenomenon of early school leaving, yet a further in-depth analysis of the influence of changing labor markets and policies on gaining further educational qualifications needs to be undertaken. Some research shows that unstable employment patterns for parents lead to drop out among adolescents. These findings need to be further substantiated and expanded, as they indicate the importance of placing the problem of early school leaving within a larger social-cultural context (Randolph, Rose, Fraser, & Orthner, 2004). There is a need to listen more carefully to what students say about their school experiences and their

involvement in their schooling with supportive teachers and administrators (Knesting, 2008). Langhout and Mitchell (2008) suggested that future focus should be to allow for conversations about the purpose and goals of school, as well as the facilitation of teacher and student empowerment.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

To inquire into the experiences of youths, who have left school without a high school diploma (early school leavers), over time and across different school, work, social and home contexts, we selected a narrative inquiry methodology. We adopted the following definition of narrative inquiry:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Looked at this way narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomenon under study. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

This definition guided our research process as we framed our research puzzle, located participants, composed field texts, and, through interpretation and analysis, moved to the composition of research texts. While narrative inquiry shares features in common with other forms of qualitative inquiry such as the emphasis on the social in ethnography and the use of story in phenomenology, it is a unique research methodology. Clandinin and

Connelly (2000) developed a conceptualization of narrative inquiry as a relational inquiry process within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

The Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identified the three dimensions of a narrative inquiry space as temporality, sociality, and place. The first dimension, temporality, draws attention to the past, present, and future of events and people. Events under study are in temporal transition, that is, events and people always have a past, present and a future. In narrative inquiry it is important to always try to understand people, places and events “as in process, as always in transition” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480).

The second dimension is sociality. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) noted that: narrative inquirers are concerned with personal conditions, and, at the same time, with social conditions. By personal conditions we mean the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of both the inquirer or participant. By social conditions we mean the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form the individual’s context. (p. 480)

A second aspect of the sociality dimension draws attention to the relational aspect of narrative inquiry, that is, the relationship between participants and inquirers.

Emphasizing the relational aspect of narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) wrote, “Inquirers are always in an inquiry relationship with participants’ lives. Narrative inquirers cannot subtract themselves from relationship” (p. 480).

Place, the third dimension of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, draws attention to “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). All events take place in places and the specificity of location is crucial. As they noted, “Place may change as the inquiry delves into temporality” (p. 481), and a narrative inquirer needs to think through the impact of each place on the experience.

Working narratively to study the lives of young people who left school early allowed us to honor the youths’ lived experiences as sources of important knowledge and understanding. It was their stories, as they told them in relationship with us as researchers, to which we attended. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) allowed us to see that narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

While narrative inquiry begins with a respect for people’s everyday lived experience, we knew that narrative inquiry did more than valorize individuals’ experience. Narrative inquiry allowed for an exploration of the social, cultural, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which each individual’s experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. However, narrative inquiry begins and ends in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquiry, as both a view of the phenomenon and as

a methodology, allowed us to study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience.

Narrative inquiry, thus, allowed us to relationally inquire into the lived experiences of the youths while staying attentive to the social, cultural, linguistic, familial, and institutional narratives within which each youth's life was embedded. We honoured each youth's narrative of experience in the narrative accounts.

Finding Our Participants

As we wrote in the literature review, we selected the term *early school leaver* rather than school *dropout*, which evoked a deficit view of our participants, or school *pushout*, which evoked a negative view of schools. Our criteria for selection of participants were that youth (a) had left an Alberta high school without a certificate, (b) were between the ages of 18 and 21, and (c) had been out of school for two Septembers, that is, for one or more years. Knowing the high number of early school leavers who had left Alberta schools (see Chapter 2), we anticipated we could find youths through posting a series of posters in schools, agencies, and community outlets. Furthermore, we anticipated that we could meet the youths who had left school early through contacting agencies who might work with them.

Finding participants was much more difficult than we anticipated. Our first poster (see Appendix C) was focused on the youths themselves. We put the posters in coffee shops, art centers, employment agencies, and on community notice boards in retail outlets and libraries. When we had limited response we began to question our recruitment

strategies. In conversations with people in schools and agencies as well as informal conversations among ourselves and with colleagues, we designed another poster that was directed to others who might know a youth who had left school early (see Appendix D). Both posters were also translated to French. We put these posters in the same or similar locations but we also posted them in educational institutions and agencies.

When we mailed the posters to contact people, we also included a letter outlining the purpose of the research, the research team, and the parameters for participation. When we received little response to this initiative, we wondered if perhaps a more direct line of communication would attract more potential participants. We began to also include a more personal letter explaining to potential participants exactly what we were expecting in terms of participation including the number of conversations and other details. See Appendices E and F.

Claire Desrochers and Marion Stewart contacted and visited the following agencies in Edmonton and Calgary – Inner City High; Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary; Calgary Mennonite Society; Calgary Catholic Immigrant Society; Norquest College; Old Strathcona Youth Coop; Pride Centre; YMCA; Outreach Network; Bow Valley College; Canadian Arab Friendship Association; Multicultural Health Brokers; Native Students Association, U of A; Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Edmonton; Alberta Child Youth Initiative; Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention; St. Theresa Pregnant and Parenting Teen Program; Youth Emergency Shelter; Native Friendship Centre; outreach schools in several school districts; and school principals in several school districts.

On the assumption some of the youths would be in the work force, we also sent posters to employment agencies and to a large local construction company. We also contacted people and agencies outside of the two major urban centres. Many people we contacted thought they knew youths with whom we could talk. We continued to put up posters. Over time we gradually began to reach the young people. Members of our research team also made personal contact with youths to ask if they knew possible participants. Sometimes participants suggested other possible participants through a snowball sampling process.

We found youths slowly over an 18-month process. As we found youths who agreed to meet with us, we selected individuals from our research team to meet with them. Sometimes researchers asked to work with certain individuals who seemed particularly interesting to them. Sometimes decisions were made on the basis of researchers' time schedules and availability to travel to other towns and cities to meet with the youths.

The 19 youths with whom we met came from all over the province, with a higher proportion from the Edmonton area than from other places in Alberta. We did, however, hear the stories of youths from diverse places across the province.

Challenges in Recruiting Participants

Recruiting participants who are early school leavers was difficult for several reasons. Firstly, there is no institutional base from which to elicit participants. We needed to reach the general population, individuals involved in a range of activities, in order to

find people to fit our unique criteria (between the ages of 18 and 21, out of school for a year, leaving an Alberta high school without graduating). Secondly, the youths who have left school early are not easily identifiable, as they have become part of the general population after leaving school. Thirdly, the idea of leaving school early (dropping out) has a stigma attached to it. The phenomenon seems to be treated as a matter that is private, personal, and evokes feelings of shame or failure for some. Fourthly, the experiences around leaving school early is a difficult subject to broach and difficult for youths to admit to, making it harder for our contacts in the community to refer potential participants to us. Some were uncomfortable raising the topic or felt they could risk alienating the youths. Fifthly, some of the youths did not see themselves as early school leavers but described themselves as individuals taking time out for various reasons (see Narrative Accounts). It is something we began to understand through the stories of our participants. In retrospect, we wonder about the choice of the descriptor “early school leaver’ in that we have become increasingly aware of how language does not easily allow us to represent the actual and perceived experiences of youths.

A Shifting Research Team

Clandinin, Buck, Steeves, Pearce, Mickelson, Li, Guo, and Guo formed the initial research team, but some changes ensued. Drs. Shibao and Yan Guo were unable to manage the heavy workload and challenges the project entailed. They left the project in the second year. Dr. Marilyn Huber initially planned to work with the team as research coordinator. She conducted the first pilot conversation with a participant and did a great

deal of initial project set up around processes. She left to assume a position with Alberta Education. Dr. Claire Desrochers worked as project coordinator for years 1 and 2. Drs. Yi Li and Pam Steeves moved to other provinces but maintained significant involvement. Graduate students Sean Lessard and Marion Stewart maintained significant involvement throughout the 2 years. Dr. Vera Caine, who worked on the literature review in the pilot study year, returned in year 2 to work with participants and to do some work on updating the literature review. Jean Chaw-Kent joined the team to update Chapter 2 in April through July of 2009. Dr. Gloria Yusishen, a former doctoral student in the Centre, worked with the tentative threads on the website and prepared a draft of Chapter 5 for the rest of the team.

Our large research team was composed of researchers with diverse experiences. Each researcher brought unique strengths and knowledge to the work. As we worked with participants and one another on the team, research relationships and conversations with participants unfolded in somewhat different ways. In narrative inquiries, there are no pre-set interview question guides, and we followed that process in our research. We did, however, create a tentative outline or way of being with participants. To that end, the initial outline for beginning the conversations allowed each researcher to create openings for participants' stories. In this way, we created the possibility for each individual researcher's distinctive imagination and knowledge to shape the relationships.

Narrative Inquiry With Participants

Using a narrative inquiry methodology, with attentiveness to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space – temporality, sociality, and place – enabled us to work with multiple forms of field texts (data). It was crucial that participants felt comfortable in telling what, for some, were hard to tell stories. We also knew that we were all researchers with multiple university degrees and that participants could see us as somewhat intimidating given they had left school early.

In our initial research team meetings, we agreed that we would begin our conversations by working through the informed consent forms (Appendix G). We, however, wanted a way to begin that would allow the youths to focus on the whole of their life experiences rather than on their particular school experiences.

We set up our meetings mindful of creating comfortable spaces for participants. Because we were trying to build relationships, often our conversations happened around food. Some participants were accompanied to the first meeting by someone they trusted and with whom they were familiar. We met in places the participants had chosen. As researchers and participants, we were somewhat uncertain at first about how the conversations would proceed. As the relationships developed over time, we came to eagerly anticipate our meetings. The time between meetings seemed to enrich the spaces for reflection for both researchers and participants.

The first youth with whom we talked helped us devise a way to think about working with other participants. Although she did not want to pursue more than one conversation with us, her brief participation helped us design an approach to beginning

the research conversations with other participants. We intentionally did not start with the event of leaving school but with the temporal unfolding of their lives in different places and in different relationships. We asked each youth to tell us about their early years, early schooling, and home and family experiences, which enabled us to begin to understand the whole of their life contexts.

In subsequent conversations, we shared tentative annals or time lines of the youths' life experiences, asked further questions that we had not understood from the first conversation, and often asked them to bring artifacts, memory box items, or photographs. On a number of occasions, they invited us to visit their elementary and junior high schools, and, when possible, we did this. On some occasions, other family members and friends were introduced. Sometimes we attended family and cultural events with the youths.

We saw most participants three times, for two conversations and then a final meeting for sharing the tentative narrative accounts we had written about our conversations with them. Occasionally, we saw participants only twice; on a few occasions, we saw participants four or more times.

Ethics

Relationships among narrative inquirers and participants are at the heart of narrative inquiry. "Relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). While we completed the ethics review process at the University of Alberta, we often discussed the relational ethics that lived at the heart of

narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (1988) wrote about the central place of relationships in collaborative research. They drew attention to negotiation as understood in terms of the negotiation of entry and exit from a school or classroom. However, they also wrote of the ongoing negotiation of the narratives of experiences carried within the researcher and participant involved in the inquiry, the “negotiation of two people’s narrative unities” (p. 281). They described this as a deep experiential process that lives at the heart of the relationships the researcher and participant negotiate. In this way, the narratives of their experiences shape the inquiry.

Ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. They are not dealt with once and for all, as might seem to happen, when ethical review forms are filled out and university approval is sought for our inquiries. Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process.

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 170)

And so it was for our work with the early school leavers. Beyond the ethics review requirements, we knew we needed to continue to think about relational ethical ways as we sought out, met with, listened to, wrote about, and eventually negotiated narrative accounts with each participant in our study. While we felt the long-term relational responsibilities to our participants, at the same time we lived with the ethical tensions around the extent to which research participants would engage in the research.

Ethics approval was first granted in the summer of 2007 and was renewed in April of 2009.

From Field Texts to Interim Research Texts

For each participant we composed a narrative account. We drew on the field texts (transcripts, field notes, artifacts) and worked within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space as we wrote these accounts. We were mindful in writing the accounts that it was our participants' stories shared in relation with us that we were telling. We realized that narrative inquiry is relational inquiry, and we knew that as researchers we were co-constructing the accounts with participants. We wanted to be respectful of the youths' stories of their experience. We negotiated each narrative account with the participant. At that time, when we and they had made the necessary changes and had an opportunity to tell us whether they felt the account was an adequate representation of their experience, we asked them to select pseudonyms for themselves. In the narrative accounts we described home communities and demographic information when it was important to the experiences of the participants. We did not name cities, towns, or schools in order to provide anonymity to participants. Occasionally when we did mention schools or places, we created pseudonyms for them.

As we worked on the move from field texts to research texts, we formed our somewhat large and physically separated research team into smaller works-in-progress groups. The smaller groups allowed us to respond to each other's tentative interpretations and representations in the narrative accounts. These responses from two or three colleagues allowed us to create more valid and thoughtful accounts.

In late January 2009, our research team gathered at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development for a 2-day meeting in order to share the narrative accounts that were finished and to discuss the next steps in the move from field texts to research texts. On the second day of the January meeting, after having read all of the completed or almost completed narrative accounts, we engaged in a tentative cross-narrative account analysis to identify threads. We recorded the emerging threads. In February and March of 2009 we continued work on the unfinished narrative accounts.

In March 2009, our research team was invited to share some of the narrative accounts at a half-day meeting with the Bullying Prevention Youth Group brought together around the topic of bullying. This group had previously met together several times. Our purpose for sharing the accounts with them was to discover if youths would find that our representations “spoke” to them and if they found that our accounts resonated with their experiences of schooling. The 14 youths who participated found our accounts compelling and provided helpful response about ways to share the work. They asked if we would return when we had completed the accounts.

From Interim Narrative Accounts to Looking Across the Narrative Accounts

On March 27 and 28, 2009, our whole research team gathered again in the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development with the purpose of reading the remainder of the narrative accounts but also to begin to look across the narrative accounts for resonant threads or patterns. We understood there would be multiple perspectives on

the interpretation of narrative accounts. We looked at the stories from an inquiry stance in order to offer a deeper and broader awareness and appreciation of the experiences of early school leaving as well as to open up new wonders and questions about early school leaving. At the end of the first day, we had identified 15 resonant threads by doing a cross-account reading. These 15 threads were put on large sheets of paper (one per sheet) and researchers then identified field texts from the participant(s) with whom they had worked on the chart paper. This material was later typed.

Each research team member agreed to write one or more threads (drawing on all relevant narrative accounts). We also set up a (controlled access) website where narrative accounts and threads could be posted. During April, May, and early June of 2009, we finalized accounts and prepared threads that allowed us to highlight the intersections, overlaps, gaps, dissonances, and silences across the lives of the youths. In mid-June of 2009, we held a teleconference to bring researchers together for a review of all narrative accounts and the threads.

In May and June, we updated our literature review to ensure relevant new research was included. By July, when we had all of the narrative accounts written and for the most part negotiated with the youth, we presented a public lecture on the research as part of the Summer Institute on Building Peaceful Communities.

In July through October, we continued to work on the 15 threads that were on the web site. We added further field texts which allowed us to create more nuanced understandings of the complexities in the youths' lives. In October, Gloria Yusishen, with Pam Steeve's help, further refined the resonant threads and wove them into six larger

threads. The chapter Gloria Yusishen wrote was then circulated to all team members who further revised the accounts in order to create valid and authentic resonances across the 19 narrative accounts. A penultimate draft was shared with all team members in late December, 2009.

On a weekend in January, 2010 the research team met to review Chapter 5, to write Chapter 6, and to prepare plans to disseminate the work. We plan to make this document available to the youth, to agencies who worked with us in locating the youth, to relevant government departments and agencies, and to post the document in its entirety on the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development, University of Alberta web site. We also plan to present the research at academic conferences including the Narrative Matters conference in 2010. Sean Lessard's M.Ed. thesis draws on this work.

CHAPTER 4. INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS

Each of the 19 narrative accounts in this chapter was co-authored by a researcher and a youth. Prior to engaging in our research with the 19 youth whose experiences are represented in the following narrative accounts, Marilyn Huber engaged in one conversation with a young woman who had left school early. It was from that first experience that we established some key aspects of our methodology. In what follows, we offer 19 narrative accounts. Each account is authored by one of the research team in relation with youth.

A Narrative Account of Steve – Joy Ruth Mickelson

Steve chose his pseudonym at our first meeting. A humorous choice we both agreed, reflecting his interest in computers. Steve is a tall, slender young man who said it was his mother who had heard about the research and wanted him to take part. He said he was quite agreeable to do so and would willingly respond to questions I would ask of him. Except for the one time we met in a quiet room of my choosing, to accommodate Steve's work schedule we met at coffee corners where loud music or loud customers at nearby tables were problematic for us both. I also handwrote notes when we both had difficulties with the recorder.

His mother brought him to one of our meetings and waited in her car for him in well below zero weather. Steve spoke positively of the things he and his family did together. He and his father played in a recreational soccer league. He and his teenage

sister got on well together – except for the normal bickering “between brothers and sister.” He spoke of being close with his grandfather.

From the transcripts, my field notes, and reflections, I have written the rest of the narrative account below. When I read and reread the transcripts I seemed able only to focus on two things: What was Steve leaving unsaid? and Were my questions too closed? In all our meetings Steve’s manner was pleasant and attentive to questions that I would ask, and it seemed to me that we had a relationship that would elicit responses about Steve’s schooling and what it had meant for him. Yet his responses were so frequently “I can’t remember. I don’t know.” I felt that there was a layer underneath the layers of his experiences in school that he was unable to share. I wondered why.

Steve: His Story, His Words

Reflections/interpretations by researcher

can’t remember – can’t remember – don’t know

a signature tune? I wonder?

am I asking the right questions? Steve presents as someone

who is willing to participate and answer thoughtfully.

likes music a lot

the music plays at full volume in the store where we first meet

later, at its fullest volume, it interrupts our conversation

can’t explain why he stopped going to school

did it bother Steve that I tic-tacked around that topic, time and time again?

it seemed not to. He replies/replays his signature tune

not attending started in Grade 9

not a school transition time. Steve said nothing significant had happened but when I pressed, gently, his answer was

I don't know. I can't remember

Does my pressure exert more weight than I think it does? Is it too much?

called to vice principal in Grade 11 – a first time called to account for attendance

told Steve my wonder – how had no-one caught on earlier? 144 classes missed

school didn't follow through with their plan

Steve sounded angry at the lackadaisical attitude of the school.

no counseling initiated

I wonder how Steve was perceived by staff and students? Who cared?

never had to sign a form to go into class

in his telling he sounded grieved that they didn't follow through

said they'd refer to attendance board – but didn't

he didn't understand why not. Nor did I. We wondered together.

friends knew he wasn't going to school

they didn't nag him to go, they talked about other thing – music and stuff

lived near school

a short, quick run to get there. has always lived near his schools

his home was place where kids went at noon, mild drug use by some

listened to music, brought their lunches, had fun

only occasional drug use by Steve

did this explain the lates?

didn't remember the names of teachers in elementary school

so much is a blank

except the Grade 2 teacher who was mean and cranky

importance of class climate – how do sensitive students react?

mom transferred him

did mom see Steve as her son who was sadly unhappy

and he only at the beginning of his school years?

or were there learning difficulties the cranky teacher was focusing on?

in Junior high school doesn't remember much about teachers or learning

so much a blank again the signature tune

kids were unruly and disrupted teaching

Steve liked order

didn't like asking for help if he didn't understand things

was fine when asking for help in other environments[his work]

still managed to scrape through courses

minimal work, minimal or maximal effort?

sees himself as a visual and aural learner

remembers what he sees and hears

wonder how this fits with subject difficulties where both are requisites

didn't like math, had trouble with it

liked science and social

had difficulties in English – couldn't organize thoughts on paper

organizing thoughts for essays was always a challenge

went to a high school to complete credits

dropped two courses

was it always easier for Steve to avoid challenges?

than to face disappointments of himself?

said adult students were more focused

liked order and quiet classes

but it was far to go on the bus for an 80 minute class

that's why he lost his job – late late late

late for school classes, late for work. Metabolism?

mom and dad told him he had to go to school and

eventually they said school or work full-time

were there at-home sanctions for non-attendance?

Steve didn't think so, save talking to him about it,

he was working part-time

had done since he was 16

four different places

fired from the music one for lates

had been warned

*was sad about losing that job. It was the time taken to get to his class
that made him late.*

let go from another job but didn't like it anyway

they were being reorganized

now working full-time – with photography which he's always liked

*is he still there? when we met for an arranged meeting, the work that
he had to do seemed pedestrian, not involving the finer points of*

photography

was that too judgmental an interpretation?

realizes that to get a good job he needs to have his high school diploma

knows that he has to complete math and science credits

definitely doesn't want a boring, assembly line type of job

***will probably go to university in a couple of years**

***when he's in his twenties**

***when he's decided what he wants to do**

***no point in wasting money on classes might not need**

Does Steve's last line sum his thoughts about schooling? Have his part-time jobs since he was 16 influenced this economic approach? He says he will bide his time, find the areas that interest him to motivate him sufficiently to enroll in schooling. Will his difficulty with asking questions when he does not understand things prove problematic? Or has that changed?

The four lines above that have an asterisk come from the last interview we had. After that meeting I wrote in my field notes:

On listening and reviewing – again I felt I had merely scratched the surface of Steve's story of himself and his learning. Is he struggling with "If I can't do it well I'm not going to try. I'll just leave it?" I often wondered about how much his family talked with him about their school experiences and expectations for him. The tension within family was there, as verbalized by Steve's mother. Steve did not acknowledge the tension as critical or disruptive to his life.

?

When Steve left – he was going to vote. He told me he was proud about going to exercise his right to vote for the first time. The last image I had of him was where he was loping across a large parking lot. He cut an impressive, distinguished figure of a bearded 6 foot two proceeding with a purpose. I wondered how many recent high school graduates voted that day,

Post Script 3 March 2009

Negotiation day – details taken from field notes

I picked Steve up from his work and we met at the same corner coffee as the previous time. The difference was that this time it was very quiet and we could talk easily. En route Steve showed me the working of a very expensive set of headphones [\$350.] that he had saved for. He had downloaded 3 Gigabytes of music into his iPod – and offered to let me listen to some classical music. I did. The sound was superb.

I read the narrative account to Steve. He smiled, especially at my descriptions of him and of his “signature tune.” When I reached my wonder about “who cared at school,” he said his teachers cared about him. “*It was only the administration that didn’t care.*” I quipped, “That was great that you felt that the teachers cared about you. How could it been enough to help you stay in school.” Steve smiled enigmatically. Steve made no comment when I read about occasional drug use, nor did he comment on my wonders about what he was not saying.

He was leaving to meet his mother and grandmother at a mall and smiled agreeably, shook hands, a couple of times. His leave taking seemed a little more prolonged. Was he reluctant to leave? Was he about to share? And if so, what?

A Narrative Account of Alice – Claire Desrochers

Mom Always Said Alice is Not Going to Finish School...

Nineteen-year-old Alice had been out of school for 3 years when she learned of the Early School Leavers study from a poster ad she saw on the wall of a youth drop in centre in a small southern city. This was a space she often visited to access a computer as well as pick up casual work. The poster piqued her interest. She spoke of it to an aunt who encouraged her to take the opportunity to tell her story so that others could benefit from hearing about her experience.

I was telling her about the poster and she's like, "Well you know maybe you should do that 'cause you know if the story does get heard by anybody else then maybe like you know if it's seen on TV or something, they'll be like, 'Oh, OK well you know I'm dropping out of school...but it could turn out good in the end.'" 'Cause I mean through everything I've been through you know like for quite some time I figured that it was going to stay the same but you know things definitely changed.

The significance of these words came to light as I learned of Alice's life both in and out of school through conversations which took place over a period of 15 months from January 2008 to March 2009. During these meetings, Alice shared what I considered to be a remarkably full life fitted into 19 short years, or as she put it, "the amount of living, of things I've done for how old I am." I came to know Alice as a young woman whose personal, family and social contexts shaped and continue to shape her into

someone who learned, not only to take care of herself, but who developed a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of friends and family in her community.

The Early Years – A Story of Caring for Others

Born in 1989, Alice spent the first few years of her life on a farm with her parents and older sister. Following a move 3 years later to a duplex on the south side of the city, her brother was born. Alice spent her childhood years living in a very open household. Alice explained that her mother always looked at their house as a “safe house” for anyone who needed a warm meal, a bed, a shower, or clothing. She was always prepared to help people in need as long as they respected that her house was a family setting in which her kids had to feel safe. Her parents took in the children of an aunt she describes as an addict who lived mostly on the streets as well as numerous cousins and “downtown friends” who often needed a place to stay.

Yeah ... my auntie was a big drug addict so my cousins lived with us ...they ran away from their foster home and came to our house ... so we grew up together...and if there wasn't a house full of kids there was my aunt and all her friends passed out 'cause my aunt was homeless. And we gave her the spare keys so she could bring all her downtown friends and they'd go and fall asleep on our floor.

As a child, she not only felt safe, but remembers being paid a lot of attention by the many adults of the household. Until she started school, Alice told me she “had no idea

that what you classified as a typical family wouldn't have as many people in one house, nor have as much activity.”

“Typical things families do” were not part of Alice's life. As a child, for example, she could not recall her father leaving the house to go to work. They lived in an area of the city known, according to Alice, for its “party houses.” Although she remembers her parents trying to keep the drugs hidden from her, even at a young age, Alice was aware of their livelihood as drug traffickers.

My parents were uh, drug traffickers at the time so they didn't have to worry about working and stuff, like that was when I was really little ... Um I was a pretty small kid...I knew the whole time, like I guess my first word was “pipe” ...I know my mom wasn't a user but my aunt and everybody else in my family were users so everybody that came through the house was. I know they tried keeping it hidden from us and everything. Like my sister's still living in denial about everything ...now it's to the point me and my mom can sit and joke around about it...my dad used to bring me out to undercover cops and say “Hello officer, would you like to meet my daughter?”

In this context, Alice learned to take care of herself and took on responsibilities not typically associated with young children. As early as 6 or 7 years of age, she recalls cooking everybody dinner, cleaning and picking up needles; she also learned to “hide stuff” before her mother got home from work.

I was the only one that knew ... I was very knowledgeable about what was going on in the house...I wasn't living in a bubble in my own imaginary world ... my

mom said I matured way too fast. Like I was 7 years old cooking everybody dinner, making sure the house was livable, making sure my aunt was still alive.

It was hard for me to imagine a child so young being exposed to the drug lifestyle let alone taking on a role as a caregiver to adults. Despite these additional responsibilities, Alice recalls this as a happy time for her within her family where she remembers being her “dad’s favorite.”

I was the spoiled one. I’ve never gotten a spanking in my life...never had a time out...never even been put in a corner, told to be quiet...and I did some pretty bad things when I was a kid.

In the neighborhood, Alice had many friends, both White and “Native.” As a young child, she recalled going up to two reserves for summer powwows with friends. I learned these visits were the extent of her connection to her Aboriginal roots. As the daughter of a part-Cree mother and a part-Blackfoot father, she did not recall much talk at home about her heritage.

I don’t remember my mom ever talking about being Native. She pretty much keeps that side of her life private; I think she’s almost embarrassed about it to an extent. She doesn’t really bring it up much unless she’s talking about her dad in passing, you know she’ll say, I’m this much Native, and leave it at that. I haven’t met any of my grandfathers. Grandpa on dad’s side died when I was really young; I met grandma from that side, but she was white. My mom’s dad moved away when she was younger, up to the reserve and remarried up there so we never met him. I only knew my British grandmother and my White grandmother.

While Alice does not participate in Aboriginal cultural events today, she nonetheless considers herself “very Native” and feels more comfortable spending time with her Native family and friends than her White friends.

When it came time to start going to the neighborhood school, Alice was so happy she remembers dancing in the office. Throughout early elementary, Alice recalls having her hand up all the time in class, achieving top marks and being an avid participant in various before and after school programs.

I was involved in every youth thing that you could imagine, like I was in choir, I went to all the after school programs like because I’m Native, I would go to the lunch program everyday, got to sit with all my friends there and then come out and hang out with the white kids and then go to a different after school program and then I’d go home.

During one of our conversations, Alice shared the contents of a carefully maintained school portfolio she had retrieved at her parents’ home. The documents reflected her success in the early elementary grades as well as her family’s support for and pride in her accomplishments. She told me about the bridge-building contest she and her best friend won in Grade 2 with a homemade entry that to this day holds a prominent place in her grandmother’s living room. As I listened to Alice remember her early years in school, I had the sense that she was growing up feeling happy, cared for, and successful.

The Middle Years – A Story of Transition and Tension

Alice describes her ninth birthday as a turning point in her life. Her parents were divorced and her mother had remarried. That year, for the first time in her life, her father did not call to wish her happy birthday and Alice was crushed. What was more, her Catholic stepfather brought two step-siblings to the family fold with whom Alice would now have to travel by bus to attend a Catholic school. Alice's transition to this new school to begin Grade 4 was difficult; she recalls being very angry at having to leave her childhood friends and community behind.

I didn't want to be there. I hit the teacher. I threw books at students. I threw a huge fit and I made it very well known that I didn't want to be in that school...After about a week or so I tried going back again.

Alice begged to be moved to another school, but given how difficult it had been to enroll her in a Catholic school as a non-Catholic, her father was not willing to move her out. She remembers struggling academically; she began skipping and spending time with two new friends with whom she engaged in bullying a classmate to the point of forcing her family to relocate to another town. Some of this tension eased somewhat when her program was modified by the principal.

He put me in remedial math, it was during regular classes. The principal took me and a couple people aside, switched up our daily routine of classes, modified it so in the morning, I'd do only two classes. It was a good thing, a bit more helpful than sitting in the class and trying to keep up with everyone else.

Some school activities were of interest, too.

Around that time, we were setting up a teepee in the school. They pulled all the Grade 6 girls out to teach us more about who did what in the olden times. They had some of the elder men come and set up a teepee outside. In the Native tradition, it's the females who go and set up the rest of the teepee, so they pulled us and we got to set up the teepee. It was a week-long project and I just got carried away with that. It was close to the end of the year so I just ended up staying.

By the time she had reached Grade 6, Alice's brother had switched in to the school. He had become known as a "troublemaker" in his old school, and she took on the role of watching out for him during her final year of elementary school.

Alice's transition to junior high school was also difficult. Less than a month into the new school year, her math teacher told her she wouldn't make it as more than a gas jockey or a Burger King server. Alice complained to the principal to no avail and stopped attending the math class altogether. She became less and less interested in school and skipped most of her classes. While drugs and alcohol had been present in Alice's life since elementary school (she recalls starting to drink at age 8), by Grade 7, she became involved in selling cigarettes and doing drugs. "Basically, in Grade 7, I'd go out all night and you know raise a lot of trouble for people."

At 13 years of age, Alice began dealing drugs. Having long ago learned from her father how to scale drugs, she began to steal them from him to sell to her friends. She described herself as "the main supplier" of drugs to her friends. While she struggled in

remedial math class at school, Alice was able to make the necessary calculations to close deals in the sale of drugs.

Throughout her time in school, Alice remembers, conflicts that arose were settled by fistfights. When I asked why this was so, she responded that violence had been a constant presence in her life and physical altercations had been a fact of life in the schools she attended.

I think that's pretty much how it is in most schools...if you have a problem you don't bring it to the principal; you go out and deal with it yourself because if you're always getting somebody involved, later on you don't know how to deal with those situations. I think that's how younger people figure it out, you don't want to get older and that's when you start fighting 'cause there's more consequences then. When you're younger, I think that's just the way of doing it between me and the people I knew. You've got to prove your strength to make it through without any issues.

By high school, according to Alice, she "didn't get along with anybody...and was fighting with everybody mostly all the time." In her community, she had also become a force to contend with. Alice believes this positioning worked in her favor as she went on to say that "every charge laid on me has been dropped – a lot of girls who charge me are scared of me." While she has been charged with assault three times, she has never received a harsher punishment than alternative measures. Violence, it seems, had shaped and continues to shape relationships she has with others.

Composing a Life on the Edge...

As a counterpoint to her involvement in drugs and violence at school, Alice started participating in church youth groups. In Grade 7, while working as the janitor in a local church, she befriended the pastor who encouraged her to join the Thursday evening youth group. As a volunteer group leader, she enjoyed creating activities to help youth talk about their problems and develop coping strategies. I saw this as an example of Alice living out a story of looking out for and taking care of others in the community, much as she had done at home with family members who needed help.

Over time, Alice became concerned that some small group leaders were not treating their members fairly. There had been times when she and her friends had been made to feel like outsiders. She approached the pastor to ask if she could tailor a program to better suit her needs as well as those of her friends and “the misfits who were getting pushed out of existence by other people.” The pastor agreed and Alice formed the community outreach youth group. She found this weekly gathering very rewarding. Word spread about the group and it soon became too large to manage. Alice recalls that “downtown kids” would turn up for lack of anything better to do and began giving her group a bad name. The situation escalated to the point where police were called out, Alice lost the pastor’s support for the group and her involvement with the church youth group ended.

At this point, Alice began leaving home for extended periods of time. Partway through her Grade 8 year, she ran away to Vancouver with a 30-year-old biker and top drug dealer who became her boyfriend. When she returned, Alice was expelled from

school for having failing marks in three of her Grade 8 classes and for fighting.

Following a summer spent in Toronto with her boyfriend, she came home to begin Grade 9 but recalled not attending a single math class that year. Given her attendance record, school administrators recommended she attend the local outreach program but Alice chose instead to enroll in another large local high school. Not only did her involvement with drugs continue in this new environment, it increased to the point where she suffered a serious meth-laced crack cocaine overdose in 2004 at the age of 15. Alerted by a dealer of her daughter's high-risk lifestyle and failing health, Alice's mother came to find her and undertook to extricate her from her drug-dependent lifestyle. She was successful, to a point, but Alice continued to party hop, remembers being "pimped out" by her cousin and started "pimping off others." A short time later, she was expelled from school for a period of 2 years. With obvious bitterness, she recalled the incident: She had tried to help a schoolmate she suspected was suffering from a drug overdose in the school office only to be fingered by another student for drug use and trafficking on school property. Alice's expulsion made local headlines. Dogged by reporters, she went into hiding, and was eventually hospitalized for 3 months following a suicide attempt.

During her stay in the hospital, a psychologist determined that Alice had a learning disability in both English and math. This provided little comfort, however, because Alice learned that no local high school would accept her as a student until the expulsion period had expired. For help, Alice turned to her father who was now living in a small community in west central Alberta. The local high school there agreed to accept Alice under strict conditions including that she teach choir to the elementary students

(Alice had always enjoyed and been successful in music and readily accepted this condition of enrollment). She moved in with her father and transitioned into a new school environment for high school. Her time there would be short-lived. Less than 2 months into the school year, a popular student was shot outside the school. A rumor began to circulate at school that Alice had sold drugs to the two young people who were accused of the shooting. Eventually, in the face of the community's suspicions and police involvement, Alice chose to leave the school and return to her home city where she enrolled in the outreach program to begin her third attempt at Grade 10.

Again, Alice's return to school was interrupted when she left the outreach program to help out a cousin who had become too drug-dependent to look after her two children. She remembers recognizing the toll that drugs were taking on her life and on that of her friends, particularly those within her extended family who had children.

I was in the drug scene too and I was just getting out of it ... that's why I quit the first time was for the kids. I was like I'm quitting. I'm taking the kids. You guys are still on it, whatever. Come see your kids anytime, but...

But quitting her drug habit was more than she could manage and she too became unable to look after the children. The removal of the oldest of the children by social services proved to be another turning point in Alice's life. As she signed the papers, she remembers coming to terms with the stark reality that the child was being removed from her care because of her drug addiction. Alice had had enough.

I was a whole other person, nobody even recognized me, and I didn't even know who I was for the longest time. I was like, "This is not me" right like I'm a totally

different person. With crystal meth, the only way it can leave your body is through your skin. So like you know when people have AIDS they get big black scabs on them, that's what you get. Like it starts just like a pimple or whatever, if you scratch it a bit it turns into a scab...So I saw what I was doing to my body and I was like you know, I don't look like me, I'm not acting like me so it's time to quit.

Alice buried her crack pipe in the backyard of her mother's home and has now been "clean" for 2 years.

It was a way for me to deal with it. I buried it, it's underneath the ground. It died when I put it there. When you put a body in the ground, you return it to the Earth. When I buried the pipe, it was like I'm returning it from my life and putting it somewhere where I'm not going to get it back.

Determined to remain off drugs, Alice has not chosen an easy path. While she is aware of the lucrative and addicting nature of the drug lifestyle, she recognizes that it is never carefree and "means a lifetime of looking over one's shoulder." And recalling the horror of what she felt coming down off the drugs is what keeps her away from them. Although Alice continues to socialize with friends who take drugs, she is adamant that the men she dates must remain off hard drugs. And I see her living out this pledge. In the time I have known her, she has ended several relationships with boyfriends who were not able to do so.

Living Life “In the Moment”

Take whatever life throws at you and run with it...

Each time we met for a conversation, Alice’s life seemed to have shifted; she was either living in a new place or had moved to a new relationship or a different job, and I was struck by the transitory nature of Alice’s life. During one of our conversations, Alice drew a rough map of her home city and pointed out all the places where she had lived during her life. As her story unfolded, I sensed that since leaving school she had probably not remained in any one of these places for more than 3 months. Alice told me that it was a similar transitory quality to our research relationship (meeting a few times over the course of a few months) that made it possible for her to remain involved in this study.

After a certain point I don’t like being involved in some things. Like staying in (my city) I move around from house to house. Just because being in one house more than 3 weeks, it drives me crazy. I don’t know what it is but being in a spot for more than 3 weeks, just something ticks and it’s like OK time to move on. I pack up my stuff and I’m gone.

Alice attributes her “living in the moment” trait to her Native roots. “Whites concentrate on what they’re doing with their lives. I live in the moment. All of my Native cousins, we’re the same, everybody else, everything’s got to be planned.”

Describing herself as one who “gets bored easily,” Alice explained that the direction she chooses for her life to take “in the moment” is made according to what has “the strongest pull.” As I listen to her story, it seems that her sense of responsibility for helping others often trumps decisions she might make for herself. Family and friends

continually come to her for help either for themselves or for their children and Alice steps in to help whenever she feels support is needed.

That's how it's always been with me, like everybody. I've just been like you know. Just kind of take them in and just make sure that they're ok...because I have seen both sides of the world ... I've done enough that I'm like maybe if I can keep them in a bubble, they won't have to experience it.

I was reminded of the way Alice had described her mother's way of welcoming others to their "safe house" in the community. I wondered whether Alice might be taking on a similar role in becoming another "safe person" in the community for those in need.

Composing a Life Beyond School

Laying Alice's life as she described it in school alongside her life outside school speaks to the complexity of her experience. It also raises a contradiction for me as I consider two distinct images of Alice that seem to emerge from her unfolding story. Looking backwards and forwards as I reflect on the place of school in the midst of this complex life, I wonder about Alice's very different lives lived on and off the school landscape.

On the one hand, I hold an image of a popular little girl who loved learning at school, singing, and playing with her friends. As she moved through school she became a young woman who struggled with math and reading, engaged in aggressive often violent behavior, became involved in drugs, was judged to have limited employment prospects, ran away from home, returned, was expelled, moved away to begin school elsewhere,

moved back home, and eventually left school early. Considering this narrative of school experience, I wondered whether Alice had ever felt she fit in past Grade 3.

Past Grade 3, I wasn't ever where everybody else was and school was really hard at that point because I had no idea what anything was and then when I would go up for help, a lot of the teachers kind of looked at it as "She'll catch on later" and then never really took it further than that. It was extremely frustrating.

What might the future hold, I wonder, for a 19-year-old woman with a Grade 9 education? Alice has not made many plans for the future, although opportunities have come up. The pastor she met during her youth group days had once tried to help by sending a video recording of her singing to a bible college in Ontario. Impressed by her talent and potential, college officials responded by offering her a full scholarship. Quite certain that student life there would be too restrictive, Alice turned the offer down.

They actually call me from time to time to see if I'm interested...there's no way I would go...it's that they have insane dress codes and I don't think that going to a bible college would fit in with who I am today ... There's like something about me ...I can't stand being in one place for weeks and weeks on end.

Apart from the first few years of her school career, it seemed that Alice had never felt valued or had a sense of purpose on the school landscape. School had little to offer her and still today, she maintains, "My theory is you don't need anything past Grade 9."

A very different image of Alice emerges, however, when I consider the stories she told of her life outside school. While she struggled in school, she thrived as a youth outreach worker and today, was respected in her family and community as a helper of

troubled youths. I wondered whether Alice's commitment to helping others might have been shaped by her childhood experiences of caring for her aunt, cousins, friends and drop-ins in her home. "Ever since we were little, my sister used to come to me all the time ... all the neighborhood kids...everybody."

In particular, she seems determined to help her younger sister break what she described as the "cycle of drugs and violence" in her city community. Alice told me of several instances where she intervened to protect children, whether it was breaking up prescription parties, providing help and guidance to children whose parents she knew to be "druggies" and more recently, taking temporary custody of a 14-year-old boy abandoned by his mother. I also learned that Alice had attempted to create an on-line blog to share her experiences and educate youth who might be experimenting and looking for drug-related information without their parents' knowledge. As I considered all these stories, it seemed that Alice had indeed found purpose and felt valued on the community landscape. This was a young girl whose sense of survival and commitment to others carried forward. As a young woman, she was continuing to help others, be they family or friends, so they could learn from her mistakes.

When I pointed out to Alice that I saw her as a caregiver and protector of children, she laughed and told me her boyfriend often referred to her as "the psychologist." Although she had never imagined herself in this capacity, Alice admitted that it would make sense to become officially qualified for work she was already doing "unofficially." But she would only consider doing so if she could find an on-line program

or alternative delivery program to sitting at a desk. “Give me a paper and pen and I can’t write; takes me a week to do a 100 word essay.”

When we met for our next conversation, a few weeks later, Alice told me she was considering training as a psychologist and was working on upgrading at the youth drop-in centre. She hoped to be able to write the mature student exam at some point in the near future. By our last conversation, however, I learned that Alice and her boyfriend were expecting a baby. At least for the foreseeable future, she would be continuing to live her life “in the moment,” mentoring others in her community without conventional credentials perhaps, but with the credibility her life experience has brought within her community. “I wouldn’t have changed anything...I know how to get myself out of those situations.”

On Looking Back Over Her Experience:

It made me think about all the things I’ve done, where I’ve been. Makes it a bit so I want to stay in one place because I think, Wow, I’ve been way too many places already. It makes me want to take a step back because I’ve already done so much. Most people my age haven’t even left the city, let alone done half the things I’ve done.

A Narrative Account of Robert – Marilyn Huber

I was excited and yet a bit apprehensive as I waited in the customer area of the mechanic shop where Robert worked as an apprentice mechanic. Robert had made arrangements for us to use the conference room at his worksite to engage in our first research conversation. Trying to calm my nervousness, my mind travelled across time and place to the stories I held of Robert from our time together as student and teacher in Foods 10 at West Central. These now nearly 4-year-old memories included:

Robert ... participating and contributing to all aspects of the foods lab, including clean up.

Robert ... negotiating with group members diverse aspects of the foods lab such as which recipe to prepare, who would complete which tasks, possible solutions to unforeseen situations that bubbled up in the midst, and so on.

Robert ... always saying, "Good morning."

Robert ... telling me that the best parts of Foods were the practical aspects ... he needed to know how to cook, to maintain his health, to budget, and so on.

Robert ... always on time for our class which started at 8:15 a.m.

Robert ... at first seemed quiet but, in time, began to share stories of his life outside of school. For example, I learned stories of Anna, Robert's niece, and of how he loved spending time on a farm a couple hours drive outside the city.³

Robert ... part way through the term begins to bring with him to class a long, thin, black case. When I ask, he shows me that inside the case is his pool cue.

Robert ... telling me how he often goes to a local pool hall between Foods and his first afternoon class. I know youth in Grade 10 are not permitted spares.⁴

It was memories such as these that drew me to ask Robert if he would consider participating in this inquiry. We had not seen one another for 4 years when we happened to meet one day in the grocery store. When he asked what I was doing, part of my explanation included my involvement in this inquiry. In response, he told me he had not completed high school. We talked about his possible participation and, prior to our saying good-bye, he gave me his phone number. Some months later, I phoned Robert and asked if he might be interested in participating in this inquiry.

³ Robert was in Grade 3 when Anna came to live with him and his parents (Anna's grandparents) and brothers (one of whom was Anna's dad). The farm belonged to the parents-in-law of a family friend; Robert spent increasing amounts of time there, including periods when he lived there.

⁴ A spare refers to a block of time in a high school student's timetable when s/he could be taking a course but is not.

Reconnecting in Conversation

Settled into the conference room, Robert and I first read and discussed the letter of informed consent. After this letter had been signed, we proceeded with our first research conversation. As a way to share stories Robert told during this and our subsequent conversations, I composed the following word images by selecting Robert's words from transcripts of our research conversations. Creating word images, as explored by Clandinin et al. (2006), is a "highly interpretive process" which "create[s] a temporal sense" of how a participant stories her or himself or a particular experience while also providing "a more vivid rendering" (p. 99).

Kindergarten to Grade 6 at Townsend Elementary

Addison Field for junior high

High school at West Central

I'm the youngest

Three older brothers

We're all three years apart

So knew teachers [at Townsend Elementary] before I went there

Knew it was a good school

Was happy to go

Nervous moving to a new school for junior high

But my brothers all went there too

My brothers also all went to West Central

For the most part, Robert's and my research conversations centered on his experiences within school. Yet, woven into Robert's tellings of his school experiences were often stories of his family and family stories. It seemed, as Robert recounted experiences from his childhood and youth, that stories of family and school could not be told separated or distinct from each other. For example, as shown in the word image above, as Robert storied his beginnings at Townsend Elementary, Addison Field Junior High, and West Central High School, he made visible that his knowing of these schools did not commence in kindergarten, Grade 7, and Grade 10 but, rather, started much earlier with stories his brothers told of their experiences on these landscapes. Robert also highlighted how his decisions to attend these schools were informed by his brothers in that it calmed Robert's nervousness to start at a new school knowing that his brothers had previously gone to the school. Exploring the importance of family connections, Robert drew links to how he thought it was similar for Anna, his niece. Referring to Anna, he said, "She can go ... [to school] wherever she'd like but, you know, it's comfortable for her to go down the hallway and see her uncles on the ... pictures. She feels like she belongs there." Just as being able to see pictures of her uncles on the school walls seemed to create a belonging place for Anna so, too, did Robert's older brothers' stories create a sense of comfort and familiarity for Robert within a particular school.

Memories of Elementary Years

Kindergarten to Grade 3

Had pretty easy going teachers

In a split Grades 2/3 classroom for Grade 3

Probably good if academic child in Grade 2

But, as a Grade 3 student

[Message was]

You're not getting it

It's getting a little dumbed down

Grades 4, 5 and 6

Start getting ready for junior high

Your free ride is over

Grade 5

My teacher was Mrs. C.

Made learning a lot more fun

An excellent teacher

Also the Art teacher

More eccentric

Definitely got along better with option teachers

They have fun

Kids have more fun in their classes

Music and Art

Weren't labelled options in elementary

Learned that label in junior high

But, knew they weren't core curriculum⁵

So they weren't as important

Can't remember what my marks were in elementary

Don't think I ever did poorly

Initially, as Robert shared early memories of his years in elementary school, he provided more factual information such as which schools he had attended, the names of his teachers, and so on. However, as our conversation continued and Robert seem to reconnect more strongly with his experiences, he shared that in Grade 3 he was in a split Grades 2/3 classroom. Moving further into the details of this story, Robert explained how “even then ... [he] could tell” the story attached to his being in this split grade classroom was that he wasn't “getting it” and needed the subject matter to be “a little dumbed down.”

Storying his memories of Grade 5, the next grade in which Robert's storytelling lingered, he explained Mrs. C. was an “excellent teacher” because she “brought more fun

⁵ “Core curriculum” in elementary and junior high schools in Alberta refers to math, language arts, science and social. Students have no “option” about taking these courses in school.

back into [learning].” Recalling enjoyable experiences he had alongside Mrs. C., Robert drew my attention to that Mrs. C. was the Art teacher at Townsend Elementary in addition to being his Grade 5 teacher and to how “because she was the Art teacher, she was a little more eccentric.” As our conversation moved to Mrs. C.’s eccentricity, Robert highlighted how it was during elementary school that he learned “options” such as music and art weren’t “core curriculum so ... weren’t as important” and that he “definitely got along better with teachers that were option teachers.” These teachers, like Mrs. C., taught in ways where they as well as students had “more fun” and where learning was made more accessible because they “changed it up a lot.”

Bringing together Robert’s sharing of these stories, I wondered about interconnections which may live among them. For example, as Robert realized he was seen by others, particularly his Grade 3 teacher, as being not “academic” and as needing to have subject matter be “a little dumbed down” alongside that the course content in “options” was “not as important” as that in “core curriculum,” did he internalize a story of more probable success in “option” courses? As Robert experienced subject matter content in these courses as more accessible and fun, did this contribute to his getting along better with “option teachers?” If so, how might Robert’s and these teachers’ relationships been shaped by teacher beliefs about who children were and who they could be in relation with each other, with her/himself as teacher, and with subject matter?

Pushed around a lot in elementary school, bullied

Kids making fun of my glasses

Somebody punching my glasses off or whatever

I'd be pretty angry

Probably in half a dozen fights throughout elementary

I wasn't the bully

Was the person getting bullied

Or, stepping in

Student at my elementary school

Had skin problems, scabs, stuff like that

A lot of people picked on him

Definitely the outcast

I stood in

Protected him

I was never really hated by anybody

School is very segregated

For example,

In Grade 5

Don't play with kid in Grade 4

That's a young kid

Grade 6 kids looking at you in the same way

That's a young kid because you're in Grade 5

Didn't talk to teachers too much

Not about anything like bullying

Had mom and dad at home

Could talk to them

They talked to the teachers

Storying how he was “an outcast” throughout much of his time at Townsend School, Robert explained he was “pushed around a lot” by bullies in the school. His stories made visible that being positioned as an outcast typically arose from physical difference. For example, he described how the bullying he experienced often began with being teased about his glasses whereas another student became the prey of his peers because of skin problems. Amidst Robert's stories of being pushed around, I learned he felt he had no space to talk directly with teachers about anything like his experiences of being bullied but, rather, could talk with his mom and dad at home who, in turn, could talk with his teachers at school. Regardless, it seemed, talking with his parents and his parents talking with the teachers, the bullying Robert experienced day-by-day in school did not shift.

For the most part, Robert and other children, such as the boy who had skin problems, were left on their own in school to face, and be pushed around by, bullies. Perhaps, then, it was because being bullied made Robert “pretty angry” or because he

was learning within his family to live by a story⁶ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) of needing to be a “good Samaritan” that Robert began to respond to the bullying by “stepping in,” “standing up” and “fighting back.” While Robert knew it mattered within his family that he live by a story of being a good Samaritan which meant helping another in a time of need, he also knew his parents would not support his fighting. Yet, given that talking with his parents and his parents talking with teachers did little or nothing to shift the stories of bullying being lived out at Townsend Elementary, what was Robert to do? How could he simultaneously “stand in and protect” his peer who was being bullied while not “fighting back”? In this way, then, Robert seemed caught between family stories, that is, he was simultaneously encouraged to live by stories of being a good Samaritan and of not fighting.

Coming to see how Robert may have felt caught between family stories, I wondered if he might have also been caught between stories at school. For example, I wondered, if some teachers might have thought it was wrong for Robert to step in, stand up and fight back while others, perhaps, thought he should protect peers in need while others, still, might have expected Robert to ignore the issue. Carefully reading the transcripts of our research conversations, I learned “the teachers didn’t like it. Especially in elementary, they didn’t agree with the fighting at all.” I also noted that Robert gave

⁶ Stories to live by is a narrative term conceptualized by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) as a way to understand the interconnectedness of knowledge, context, and identity. They wrote, “Stories to live by, is a phrase used ... to refer to identity, is given meaning by the narrative understandings of knowledge and context” (p. 4).

this response along with telling how he had been “put into detention for watching a fight.” This led me to wonder if, at least at times, teachers responded to Robert’s fighting by assigning him detentions.

First time I ever skipped school was in elementary

Was put in detention for watching a fight

Principal lecturing me and three others

I’m watching my clock

I’m rocking on my chair

Principal got angry

Kicked my chair out

Dropped me on the floor

I got up

And, left the school

Listening to Robert recount this event, his words repulsed me as I considered how such a moment might have contributed to children living out stories of bullying at Townsend Elementary. I imagined as Robert’s telling continued, his story would clarify how this incident had led him to skip school more and more. Instead, Robert explained:

Principal took time to track me down

Came to my house

Took time to care

Talked to my mom and me

I explained my side

He listened

He explained what made him go off

I listened

It really stood out to me

He took time to care

Made a good impression on me

Initially, I was surprised when Robert explained that he had understood the principal coming to his house to talk about the events which led to his leaving the school as an expression of care. What stories, I wondered, might have shaped Robert's response. Might it have been a continuation of living by a story of being a good Samaritan? In other words, might Robert have felt responsible to *turn the other cheek* and engage in a conversation in which he and the principal listened to each other's perspectives? Or, might another family story, that is, a story in which Robert "was always taught to respect ... [his] elders, whether they were teachers or police or whoever" have been living behind his response? Considering further Robert's family stories, I wondered, if Robert's thinking may also have been shaped by an intergenerational family story of a strong work ethic, a story Robert's grandfather had taught to his mom which, in turn, she alongside Robert's grandfather had taught to Robert. Explaining this story Robert said, "I have a strong work ethic installed in me, no half job is a job done at all.... You've got to work hard and don't half-ass anything." Might Robert have understood the principal taking the time to "track [him] down" and then coming to his house to talk with him and his mom

rather than expecting them to come back to the school as a demonstration of work ethic? When the principal took time to not only explain “what had made him go off” but also to listen to Robert’s perspective, might Robert have seen this as the principal not living a story of responding in a “half-ass” way? Did Robert understand the principal’s willingness to explain “what [had] made him go off” as a way of taking responsibility? Thinking further about Robert’s telling I also wondered if he might have seen the principal as caring because he took the time to listen and to talk with Robert and his mom about events on the school landscape. Perhaps, I realized, this was a profoundly different response than what Robert had received from his teachers either when they had witnessed or when Robert’s parents told them about Robert’s being pushed around and bullied at school.

Grade 6

D.A.R.E.⁷ program

Taught:

Don’t smoke, it will ruin your life

Don’t smoke, stay in school

Smokers are not good people

⁷ D.A.R.E. – Drug Abuse Resistance Education – according to the Alberta Teachers’ Association website, is a “comprehensive prevention education program designed to equip elementary school children with the skills to recognize and resist social pressures to experiment with tobacco, alcohol and other drugs” (“D.A.R.E Program Keeps Children Off Drugs,” n.d.). The D.A.R.E. program was included into Robert’s Grade 6 program and was taught by both a local police officer and Robert’s Grade 6 teacher.

They're hard on the health system

They're hard on themselves

Their second-hand smoke is bad for you

I failed D.A.R.E.

Wouldn't listen [to the messages being presented]

Wouldn't do the assignments

Just didn't want anything to do with the program

Knew then I was going to be a smoker

If I could go back

Would smoke right on front step of school

It was just a joke

As Robert recounted his experiences in D.A.R.E., he passionately highlighted the dominant messages he remembered conveyed within the program – that is, smoking can ruin your life, smoking can lead students onto future pathways of not completing high school, and people who smoke are not good people because they are hard on the health system and themselves and their second-hand smoke is bad for others. Repeatedly, Robert referred to the D.A.R.E. program as a “complete joke” because it did not discourage him from smoking but, rather, seemed to strengthen his resolve to “be a smoker.”

Storying his experiences in D.A.R.E., Robert drew links with how his dad, grandpa and brother – three significant men in his life – smoked. To Robert, then,

participating in the D.A.R.E. program by listening to the messages and completing the assignments meant accepting or agreeing that his grandpa, dad and brother were “not good people,” but, instead, were people who had ruined their lives and who did not value children and youth staying in school. Robert experienced the teaching of D.A.R.E in his Grade 6 classroom as having no space in which alternate or additional stories could be considered or told, stories for example in which people who smoked: were cognisant and respectful of the harmful effects of second-hand smoke and, therefore, like Robert’s dad, did not smoke inside their home or around non-smoking family members; valued and had completed high school such as Robert’s dad made visible when, according to Robert, he said, “You can’t even push a broom in my warehouse unless you have Grade 12. You’re not allowed to work here unless you have it.” So, too, did Robert’s grandpa know and share stories of the importance education held in his life. To Robert, in neither of these men’s lives did it seem that smoking had “ruin[ed]” their lives.

Memories of Junior High Years

Pretty much an outcast right up until Grade 9

Always a couple of bullies in school

Especially bullied in Grade 7

One kid

Loved to smack me upside the head

That was his thing

Thought it was funny

(Research conversation, September 2008)

Stories of being bullied seemed even more pervasive and commonplace for Robert at Addison Field than at Townsend Elementary, especially during his year in Grade 7. While there were “a couple of bullies in the school,” one boy, according to Robert, seemed to find it funny to “smack” Robert “upside the head” and, therefore, did so regularly. Through Robert’s storytelling, he made visible he responded to the bullying and to this boy in numerous ways. Initially, he described, “I told him to stop multiple times” and “I talked to the teacher and principals.” He did so, he explained, because, “I ... [was] the new kid in Grade 7. I ... [didn’t] want to get in trouble.” When neither method of response was effective, Robert highlighted:

Finally, I told [the administrators], you know, if this happens again because you guys haven’t done anything about it then he’s going to know what it’s like to be smacked. And that was fine by them. You know, like they weren’t, they were, “No, you’re not supposed to hit him Robert.” And, that was as far as it went.... When ... it happened, more blame was put on to him than me.

Unlike in elementary school where Robert did not talk with his teachers about “anything like” the bullying he was experiencing, at Addison Field he tried talking with both teachers as well as the administrators. However, when neither these conversations nor Robert’s direct requests to the youth who were bullying him were effective, Robert returned to living out stories of “fighting back.” When he chose to teach the one bully, in

particular, “what’s it’s like to be smacked,” more blame was placed by the administrators onto the bully than onto Robert.

Teachers, principals don’t like fighting

Would tell me

“You shouldn’t be doing that”

Get suspensions

Days off

Or, have to sit in the office for the day

They don’t tell you what happens to the other kid [involved in] the fight

You don’t see that other kid for a couple of days or whatever

Sometimes “Sorry” is said back and forth

That’s about it

Inquiring into what happened when Robert fought back as a way to “protect” either another youth who was being bullied or himself, I learned that he was often assigned an in- or out-of-school suspension. Robert referred to “out-of-school suspensions” as having “days off” even though, because one or the other of his parents were at home, he had to “do homework, ... clean and do all ... sorts of stuff. It was a punishment while I was home.” He was *punished*, Robert explained, because his parents did not agree with him fighting and because they valued his being in school and attending classes. I imagine they did not wish for Robert to understand or experience an out-of-

school suspension as “days off” to be enjoyed. In-school suspensions, Robert described in this way:

The day goes by pretty slow but it wasn't bad.... You got to do your work quietly. You didn't have to deal with all the kids yelling and screaming and the teacher stopping 10 times to calm everyone down. You did what you had to do and you were done.... Sleep if you could sleep otherwise you just kind of sit there and stare around for a few hours.... [The rooms] were probably 4 feet by 6 or 7 feet. I used to remember how many ceiling tiles there were in there and how many rivets and screws because I was in there enough times in junior high.... [I'd] bring a dime ... [to] take stuff apart.... They were small little cubicles with a door that opened inward so the room got smaller when the teachers came in.

When I asked if Robert felt he was responded to differently depending on if he was standing up for someone or for himself, Robert explained, “As you go up in the grades, [citizenship] ... matters less and less.... [Message is] don't involve yourself. You know, you're going to get yourself into trouble.” It seemed, then, while there was some tolerance given when Robert “smacked” the boy who had been bullying him, standing up for others or to use Robert's words of “being a good Samaritan” was seen as something to avoid. As I pondered how a message of “don't involve yourself” became more prevalent as Robert moved up in the grades, I wondered if this story might have also been shaping the teachers and principals at Addison Field as well as, perhaps, Townsend Elementary. That is, recalling how nothing seemed to change when either Robert's parents in elementary school or Robert in junior high school talked with teachers and administrators

about the bullying he was experiencing, I wondered if maybe they, too, thought it easier or safer to not become involved. Might the teachers and administrators have feared their involvement could lead to “trouble” with other youths, staff members, parents or school district personnel? I also wondered about the tolerance Robert had been shown for “smacking” the boy. Was his action tolerated because, at least according to Robert, the administrators “ha[dn’t] done anything” when Robert initially told them about the bullying or when he warned that he would fight back if the bullying continued.

Gym’s the worse

More adrenaline

Everybody’s active

There’s the time to bully

Everybody’s spread out, separated from the teacher

Teacher can’t watch, see everything

Things happen in the corner that can’t happen in a classroom

A ball in the face

Or, slashed with a hockey stick

Isn’t fun

So skipped most of Gym

Biked around the neighbourhood

See what’s in the back allies

Go to the ravine a lot

Keep myself busy

Not too often, I'd go to the mall

Gym, according to Robert, was the worst in terms of bullying due to increased adrenaline, opportunities when youths' actions could not be seen by the teacher as well as that some learning activities could be used as a cover for bullying. As already explored, Robert tried many different ways to stop the bullying he was experiencing at Addison Field. When none of these responses were effective, Robert started skipping gym and health. "Health," according to Robert, "just happened to be a casualty seeing as it was after gym." By skipping gym, Robert was able to escape the worst of the bullying. During this time, Robert spent most of this time alone biking in the neighbourhood and through the ravine. As Robert explored the activities he engaged in, I thought it a bit ironic that even though he was skipping gym, he was, intentionally or not, engaging in physical activities. I also realized, intentionally or not, by skipping gym, Robert was defining when and how he would be isolated from his peers rather than letting teachers and administrators have this authority.

While Robert's parents did not like or support his skipping class, Robert said, "I think they could see where ... it was coming from, you know if the kid is getting bullied he's not going to want to be there.... They didn't like it but they knew I had a problem." Perhaps, I realized, Robert's parents knew the different ways in which Robert had responded to, and tried to stop, the bullying he was experiencing. Maybe, like Robert, they also did not know what to do so that Robert could attend gym without being bullied.

I imagine it is deeply frustrating and painful for a parent to see and experience her or his child being bullied day after day in school and to knowingly, then, have to encourage his or her child to keep returning to such places. I also imagine it may be difficult for a parent to watch her or his child learning stories of using physical violence as either a way to get what they want or as a way to protect themselves.

The gym teacher, Robert storied, reacted to his skipping and failing grades by “complaining” to Robert, his parents and his homeroom teacher who “would try to enforce things a little more.... He gave me detentions and, yeah, I got school suspensions.” The health teacher, Robert said, “didn’t have a problem with it.... I think out of the whole year I went to six classes and I came out of there with a 90%. When I went to class, I did my work ... he [referring to the teacher] was happy with it.”

Doesn’t matter if you come to class

Doesn’t matter if sitting and listening to your Walkman

Doesn’t matter if you’re picking on people all day

If marks are good

Or, if you’re throwing the winning touchdown

Probably not going to catch too much flak

Exploring with me his skipping gym and health as well as his grades in these courses, Robert made visible another story that seemed, at least in his knowing, to be shaping Addison Field School. Central in this story was that what mattered or counted in the school was the achievement of “good” grades and/or leading a school sport team to victory by “throwing the winning touchdown.” Having one or both of these stories in

place meant other stories would be overlooked, stories such as poor attendance, not listening or participating in class and picking on others. As I considered this story alongside other stories Robert told, I was reminded of how all too often in both my student and teacher experiences, a thread of community-making is seen as a way to begin a school year, but within a few days or weeks the focus is shifted away from community- and relationship-making to getting on with mandated subject matter. I wondered, might Robert's stories of bullying, fighting, suspensions, citizenship, and so on, been otherwise, had he experienced community-making in school such as that which Dewey (1938) and Greene (1995) described? In their understandings, community is necessarily always in the making as it is responsive to, and inclusive of, the ongoing lived experiences of school participants.

Considering this view, I recognized response other than detentions and suspensions would have been needed when youth bullied, fought, or skipped class. Rather than preventing youth from interacting with each other or mandating they say a token "Sorry" to each other, spaces would need to be intentionally created that drew on, for example, Buber's (1947) metaphor of meeting on a "narrow rocky ridge" (p. 218). Attending to communities that have contrasting points of view, Buber saw the ridge as a place where those with opposing perspectives meet and engage in "real conversation" (p. 240). Such a space would be, perhaps, like that which was created between Robert and the principal of Townsend Elementary when the principal came to Robert's home to discuss with him and his mom the events which had led to Robert's first incident of "skipp[ing] school." In this space, Robert and the principal listened to each other tell

what I imagine was, at least initially, contrasting and opposing perspectives. Engaging in “real conversation,” Robert came to see the principal as someone who cared. Perhaps, the principal also came to see Robert in a similar way. Had such conversation been foregrounded among youths or between youths and teachers at Addison Field, I imagine stories of skipping class as a way to avoid being bullied may have been unnecessary. I also imagine Robert’s parents would have been positioned quite differently within the school, that is, rather than being simply informed of decisions, such as Robert being given in- and out-of-school suspensions, they would have necessarily been participants within conversations.

Memories of Senior High Years

Recounting stories of his going to West Central, Robert began by saying that he “definitely ... wanted to go” to this school and reminded me that his brothers had also gone there. However, as Robert moved further into his experiences within the school, his tellings revealed the school was “just too big. You get lost as a single person. What was it? I think 2,000 people at the school. You’re a nobody until you make yourself a somebody.” Asking how students would make themselves somebody, Robert explained, “You better get on the sports teams ... and get into a certain group, figure out who is the popular group.” Thinking about Robert’s comments about how the school felt “just too big” and that “you [could] get lost as a single person,” I was reminded again of the necessity of community making within schools. In so doing, I imagined how difficult it

might be for each of the 2,000 people to “make [him/her]self a somebody,” and what might be necessary for ensuring spaces for real conversation?

Atmosphere is more relaxed

But, teachers aren't there to babysit

Not going to hound you

“Do your work or don't”

“I don't care”

Run down, beat up school

Leaking roof

Water rings all over the ceiling

Some areas probably still had lead paint

Others unpainted

Students spitting on the floors

Throwing garbage all over the place

Just disgusting

Didn't enjoy sitting in decrepit chairs

Or, shoddy-looking workmanship around me

You think, “I'm coming to a piece of junk every day”

“Don't want to be here”

As Robert's storytelling moved even deeper into his experiences at West Central High School, several of his stories seemed to hold central a focus on care as they made visible not only his interactions with teachers but, as well, how he experienced the physical condition of the school. Many teachers, Robert highlighted, followed what seemed to Robert to be a commonplace way at West Central, that is, they made clear it was not their responsibility "to babysit" youth which included "hound[ing]" them to complete and submit their work. Talking specifically about his interactions with his English teacher, Robert explained her attitude toward youth was, "Do your work or I don't care." In response, Robert highlighted, it did not "take too long for me to start missing that class" and to "stop doing any homework." In turn, Robert said, the English teacher countered with messages such as, "If you're not interested in doing your work, then I'm not interested in continuing this on.... You can do the course ... some other time dear, you know, next semester." She also added that, perhaps, Robert should take *the less academic and rigorous* English 13 rather English 10. English 13, the teacher explained, was taught by another teacher. Robert replied to these messages by "just stop[ping] to go" to class altogether.

Although less common, Robert storied some teachers as caring because they did "hound" students about attending class and doing their work. One of these teachers was Robert's Social teacher. Exploring his interactions with this teacher, Robert stated,

I went to class most of the time. It really irked the teacher if I didn't show up. She was an excellent teacher.... She cared about every student in her class. It

showed.... I got good marks.... It just really made her angry if I wasn't there to get those same [good] marks every day.

It seemed, then, the stories Robert lived as a student were negotiated in relation with those he experienced his teachers as living. In other words, when Robert felt the teacher did not care about him he quit doing his work and, eventually, attending class. However, when Robert felt his presence in class and who he was as a student mattered to the teacher he would work toward getting "good marks" and attending class "most of the time." In this way it seemed Robert was unwilling to let teachers whom he felt did not care about him define or shape who he was and who he could become. Coming to this realization, I was reminded of Robert's earlier experiences in the D.A.R.E. program. Perhaps, just as Robert would not listen to and engage with learning the ways in which his dad, grandpa, and brother were being defined within this program, Robert was choosing to "just stop" interactions with teachers who were trying to define him in ways that were inconsistent with, or bumped against, his knowing of who he was and who he could become.

Messages of care were also made visible to Robert through the school's physical condition. Exploring areas of the school that were "just disgusting," Robert's stories highlighted a lack of caring about West Central both by the school district personnel as well as youths. Thinking about how the school district demonstrated their lack of care through "shoddy workmanship" which included a "leaking roof," "water rings all over the ceiling," and "unpainted walls" whereas youth "[spit] on the floor" and "[threw] garbage all over the place," I wondered about possible interconnections between these

stories. That is, I wondered if as youth experienced a “run down, beat up school” they felt it did not matter or perhaps that they were even justified to spit and throw garbage on the floors. Noting these behaviors, did the school district see fit, then, to not bother completing maintenance work such as painting walls and replacing stained ceiling tiles?

Attending to Robert’s telling of how he experienced, and responded to, stories at West Central such as those highlighted above, I was reminded again of his learning from his mom and maternal grandpa to have a strong work ethic, one which included a story that “no half job is a job done at all.” I wondered if it was as Robert laid these family ethics alongside those he experienced others as living out at West Central that the feeling “I ... don’t want to be here” began to shape his thinking.

Grandpa

Dad’s father

Told me

Junior high – time to figure out

Going to university?

Or, going to trade school?

Thought about, “What makes sense for me?”

Know I’m going to work with my hands

Do well at it

Know I’m not going to university

Didn’t want to sit at a desk

In high school

They want you to take the *academic* courses

That's what they want

Entering into high school, Robert made visible, he carried within himself a story learned from his paternal grandpa, that is, that a purpose of junior high school was for youth to “figure out” if they were “going to university or ... going to trade school” and that senior high school was a time to engage with courses which supported the youth’s decision. Thinking about which pathway – university or trade school – made sense for him, Robert highlighted he knew he was “going to work with his hands” and, as well, that he was good at doing so. He explained his knowing drew on multiple background experiences, some of which were: renovating houses with Allan, a family friend, as a part time job throughout junior high; liking and knowing he was competent in shop class; and, working on farm equipment and vehicles with Allan’s father-in-law,⁸ a retired mechanic.

However, as Robert moved into high school he soon realized that what was foregrounded in this context was not his knowing and his experiences or his grandpa’s story but, rather, what teachers and administrators wanted which, according to Robert, was for him to take courses included in the *academic* track. These courses, Robert felt, did not support his decision to attend trade school. Indeed, it seemed, Robert’s desire to

⁸ Robert storied both Allan and his father-in-law as mentors who had each significantly and positively impacted his life.

enter into a trade was neither acknowledged nor supported at West Central. Explaining further, Robert said,

If they would have said, “Okay, well if you want to go into the trades, you need to have these courses and so let’s open up all these dead, empty rooms in these wings.” Because when I went to West Central most of the shops were closed down ... [except] automotives and welding. The machine shop still sits there to this day, as far as I know, full of dust. I got the chance both with teachers and behind teachers’ backs to go into these other rooms and find out what was there. It made me pretty angry to know that there was a ton of equipment there that had a lot of potential both in equipment and for students that aren’t getting trade trained anymore.

Attending closely to Robert’s words and thinking further about storylines made visible in his tellings, I was drawn back to consider again Robert’s learning that “option” courses were not “as important” as core curriculum in elementary school. I wondered if, perhaps, the senior high school continuance of this story was teachers’ and administrators’ desire for youth to focus only on courses included in the *academic* track. If so, had these stories shaped decisions to shut down rooms and programs that supported youth “getting trade trained”?

Grade 11

I was officially still there

Even though I didn’t show up anymore

Can’t recall what school did about my not showing up

Don't recall talking to a counselor or principal about my attendance

Don't remember getting suspensions or anything

They probably didn't care

Perhaps similar to how Robert's desires, decisions, and knowing, as shown in the previous word image, seemed invisible at West Central, so, too, did it seem was Robert's progression from "not showing up" for some classes to stopping altogether to "show up" for school. Attending to that Robert's possible explanation of why he could not "recall what the school did about ... [his] not showing up" was that "they probably didn't care," I wondered how these events might have shaped the stories Robert told of school as well as those he told to himself about who he was and who he could become. For example, as Robert left West Central did he internalize a story that his presence in school was insignificant, that is, that his not showing up would have mattered, and been attended to differently, had he been "a someone," perhaps a someone whose educational goals had fit more easily with that which teachers and administrators wanted or a someone who was "on the sports teams ... [or was in] a certain group?" Had Robert left school with a story that he could or would have been more successful if he had more adequately measured up – that is, if he had: fit within the definition and boundaries of what it meant to be an "academic child" at Townsend Elementary; denied that his preferred learning style seemed to be kinesthetic which meant that he learned best through moving, doing, touching and so on; silenced stories taught within his family such as needing to be a good Samaritan and to have a work ethic which included believing "no half job is a job done at all;" and, so on. Coming to these thoughts and questions, I wondered, then, if Robert

might have needed to leave school so that he could hold onto educative possibilities⁹ of who he could become. With this wonder foremost on my mind, I looked again at the transcripts of Robert's and my conversations. In so doing, I learned from Robert:

School's school

At the time you don't think that it really matters

As far as I can see now it doesn't

Something forced to do

Didn't have a lot of interest, relevancy to me

All the interruptions in class

The Charlie Brown teacher – “Wah, wah, wah, wah” all day long

Not a lot of discussion

A lot of repetition

Again and again and again

For example, learn about a science experiment for 4 days sitting in classroom

Then, in science lab for 1 day

The learning – it's kind of lost

Just teach by doing the science lab

Then it's relevant

⁹ Exploring qualities of experience, Dewey (1938) highlighted that an experience is educative, or promotes growth, when it continues to move us forward on “the experiential continuum” (p. 28).

Then you might gain something from it

Have learned a lot outside of school, in the real world

Way more than in school

Being on the farm

Lots of biology

Working at the hazardous waste dump

Lots of chemistry

All of a sudden chemistry is fun, relevant

People learn better by doing

Active learning

Once I get it in my hands

I understand it

I do enjoy learning

A Narrative Account of Scott – Marni Pearce

I remember ...

the early learner thing

a really BIG part of my life

a good elementary experience

nothing too dramatic or tragic

the same struggles that every elementary student faces

pretty generic experience

One of the rules was
you had to take off your shoes
when you come in for recess
or change your shoes
when you go outside

I hated that.

So
instead of changing my shoes
I would go and hug the teachers.

I would tell them
how pretty they were

or
how well I did
or
what I was learning.
And the shoes?
A non-issue.
teachers didn't have to do it
why should I?

I remember ...

junior high school
that's
where it kind of started
the whole emotional changing
started missing a lot of school
that's when,
I guess,
the *bullying* would have started
getting personal

I remember ...

I came out of grade 7 with a very high average

in grade 8

down

to

the

60's.

the transition grades, 6 and 9,

are very hard

to go

from a comfortable place

with comfortable authority figures

and comfortable people

to a completely new place

no comfortable resources

new people

new social atmosphere

I just remember

feeling

out of place

young

awkward

I remember

at the end of grade 6

finally starting to understand things that made you popular

what I wore
was important
and what I said
was important
and how I looked
was important

I remember ... grade 7

being so self conscious

so fearful that people were judging you

I remember the first day

I remember sitting at the back

being very quiet.

I remember wearing all black

black sweater

black chunky boots

I thought I was cool

I remember liking girls in grade 7

in grade 7 I still liked,
I still liked girls
that's one of the things
I remember distinctly
about grade 7.

I knew that I was better
than some
but not as good
as the rest

there's a class system
in junior high school
you have your top rung
your middle rung
and then
the bottom rung

I remember realizing that in grade 7,
being very aware of it.

the kind of friends that you initially make on that first day of grade 7
determines the situation for that day

for the next 3 years of your life
in junior high school
that's where it starts
right?

I remember ...
being aware of the friends I had
and the company that I held
and what I liked to do
and how I dressed
and how I looked
and what my family could afford
all of those things

I was also very aware
there was a whole 'nuther tier
I wasn't privy to.

you could see it
how happy they were
how beautiful everybody was
and how it was great fun.

I remember seeing that
and knowing that
and trying to be part of that
but
knowing
I was different
somehow.

I remember grade 10 - high school
wanting to go there because
it had
independent self directed learning, ISDL
I really loved that idea
I had some friends
willing to go there with me
I think "my luck has changed"
No longer fearful.
No more black.
Trying to meet as many people as I can

By the end of the first day I had created my own new circle of friends
Top tier.

I'm feeling good

designer clothes

looking good

Life is good.

But

I'm still insecure

it's just a different kind

of insecure

the kind

you don't talk about.

We all have cover stories

and

one of the ways

to be popular

is to not talk about

your insecurities.

You make yourself look

like you don't have

any.

In October,

I remember ...

something happens

there was a falling out

between me

and my closest friend

now, it sounds like we were

playing chess

it's pretty much what it was

... a big game

she was the queen of the group

she knew

i collected

ancient daggers

i trade them go to trade shows

just ... a hobby

I knew

I wasn't going to win

I wasn't going to come out of this with friends.

that day i was

planning to trade with a friend

it was in my backpack

She accused me

of

outlandish, outrageous things

a friend warned me

locker search

i knew

what she was trying to do

so

i surrendered it instead

i knew

I hadn't done anything wrong

thought

it would all be solved

sorted out

the vice principal recognized there was

a lie involved
“go home, take the weekend off,” he said.
and then
later that day
the principal, who I’d never even met
leaves a message on our voice mail
saying
I was expelled.

now I know they had no right to expel me
without a hearing
without evidence
without informing my parents
but
at the time
I didn’t want to go back
I didn’t feel I had any power
once I left
I had no friends

and then
three weeks
spent sitting at home

waiting for the phone to ring

and finally

I'm at a new school

but

a completely different side of the city

less than half the size

but didn't know anybody

but

I remember

thinking that everybody would know

what I had been accused of

all the teachers would know

for sure

I remember thinking

here we go

teachers that are gonna think

I'm some kind of delinquent

I remember thinking

I'm just gonna try to be as quiet and blendy as possible

the first day
wearing nothing that would make me stand out
staying under the radar.

But I remember
skipping class
My mom would drop me off at school
I'd wave goodbye
and I'd walk to the bus stop
and go home

I remember
in grade 10
later on spring time

I came out
to my mom

It takes a lot of courage to identify yourself

Once I came out of the closet
my whole life was different
by identifying myself as what I was
it grows you stronger
sometimes you get reactions
people who are supportive

sometimes
people are indifferent and don't really care
and then
sometimes
they say oh
you're a faggot
that's gross
i always knew my life would be harder

I make it to grade 11
because I know
I'm smart
and they can't deny a child the right to attend
a certain class
my mom works for Education
so I know things
and I go to the principal
and the teachers
and said, "you're going to put me in these 20 level classes because I know you have to"
and they did
even though
I didn't

necessarily

pass grade 10.

But I know

all you need to get a high school diploma

is credits.

and you can get credits just by attending

and not necessarily completing

or passing the course

but they don't tell people that

I found out

because I read

the policy manual.

If I was smart enough to read the policy manual

I was competent enough to take

Science 20 and Math 20

obviously.

It was important

because

I didn't want to look like a fool.

I didn't want people

to think

I was stupid.

I loved to provoke teachers

I remember

I had a teacher

who was pro-life

and I'm very

pro-choice.

she was preaching

not teaching.

And I would get her going.

I would get her going and

help her have some personality

and my classmates would encourage me.

“get her going today” they'd say

that was one way for me to make friends.

the more powerful I appear

or make myself

people are going to want to hear

what I have to say

but she engaged me
when I pushed her
instead of telling me that I'm wrong
or that she was the teacher
she just
pushed me back.
I felt valid
like I had something to contribute
I was worth listening too.

Social

Humanities

Drama

I share a personality with those kinds of teachers

Science and math people

I don't.

I've never had an English teacher I didn't like

I've always been able to discuss literature

or politics

or personal values, moral beliefs

With my math and science teachers

there was never room for discussion

I always hated that.

couldn't stand those classes.

I went to the classes that I felt

were fun

or where

I liked the teachers

or where I thought

they were necessary.

But

at that age

it was like every class

was pretty much

unnecessary

unless I really liked the teacher.

but

I would convince the teacher

not to report my absence

and

I wouldn't get a phone call reporting to my mom

that I had missed the class

and if I was caught out of class
by one of my vice principals
I would just ask them
not to report me
and they wouldn't
I don't know how I did it.
like 212 days
I missed in grade 11 and 12.
I never even got a letter.
how do you get away with that?
but
even though I didn't have a lot of good friends in school
I was close with many of the teachers
I made sure
to get to know
the admin support
the secretaries
the janitorial staff
I knew them all by first and last name.
Pretty soon we would have coffee together
I remember ...
being invited into the staff room.

and yet
they didn't report my absences.
and if I didn't like an assignment
I would ask for a different one
and I would usually get it.

I stayed 'til grade 12
I completed high school
I just never
finished high school.
I never set out
to not finish
it was just a by-product of choice
 of choosing not to attend classes
 or not completing enough work.

at the end of grade 12
I just knew
that I didn't care enough
and graduating
wasn't important to me
and going to grad

wasn't important to me

I didn't care

because I always knew

that I didn't need a high school diploma to define myself

or to get a job

or go to college or university.

I remember

no one ever approached me

and stopped me in the hall

and said "you can't graduate"

I still don't identify myself

as

a

high

school

drop

out.

that's not who I am

I'm not

a

high

school

drop

out.

I just chose not to finish

high school.

A Narrative Account of Jasmine – Yi Li

I Had Big Dreams: Jasmine's Stories

Every child dreamed to be a doctor first. That one was gone when I realized that I don't like hospitals. My second goal was to work for the United Nations. I wanted to travel and help people in the third-world countries. The third area I was interested in was pharmacy.

I first met Jasmine on a snowy Saturday morning in mid-March 2008. I had been working on a planning committee to provide newcomer students with additional support in a local high school since May 2007. I came to know a youth worker on that committee and really admired what he had been doing with the newcomer youth. I told him a little bit about this project and how difficult it had been to find youth participants. It so happened that Claire also knew him. Through several emails, phone calls and visits, eventually Claire arranged for Jasmine and me to meet and talk. I phoned Jasmine the night before, telling her that I would come and pick her up. We had agreed to meet on the University of Alberta campus because Jasmine needed to go to downtown for a youth group meeting afterwards.

When Jasmine and I arrived at the Hope House, it was already 10:40 a.m. I showed her around from the basement to the attic, and she was very impressed by the children's hope artwork. We finally settled down at the small round table in the Jack Chesney Library and began our first conversation. As we went through the informed consent forms, I asked why she was interested in participating in this research. "I want to help other youths," she told me.

In the following 3 months, I met Jasmine two more times for our research conversations at the Hope House. As I sat beside her at the small round table in the library with a cup of tea and some snacks in front of us, I listened to her stories about her life in central and northern Africa and in Canada.

Life in a Central African Country: I Could Read Perfectly in Grade 4!

Born in June 1987, Jasmine's young life has been greatly affected by the war in that central African country. She was separated from her mother when she was only 8 months old. The war was getting closer to her birth place, a small city in the south. So her grandmother had to take her to the capital city in the north to join her big brother, who had moved there several months before they did.

My mom was left behind because she got married again to a man from a small village in a different tribe. Her father-in-law and his tribe wouldn't let her go. Once they take a woman to their village they never let her go as if they own her for good. She and the man had four children. The man died in 1998, but her son and the other people wouldn't let my mom go. She somehow escaped, but she left two older children behind and took the two younger ones with her. She's in another African country right now.

Jasmine has not seen her mother again since then. She and her big brother were raised by their grandmother, uncles, and aunts.

Jasmine cannot remember the exact year when she went to kindergarten.

because back home in order for a child to go to kindergarten, she or he has to lose teeth. It is weird, but children lose their teeth when they turn 5 or 6. So that's when they go to kindergarten. Sometimes a Grade 1 class might consist of mixed-age children, ranging from 5 year old to 13 year old.

But she remembered that she went to a K-9 Catholic School in the capital city. It was a one-story school house with nine classrooms, each with about 20 to 30 children in it. The children sang songs and recited poems in Arabic, the common language, in kindergarten (Jasmine still knows a little bit about her tribal language). They had to memorize them and pass a test before moving on to Grade 1; otherwise, they would stay in the same class for another year. She cannot remember what she did during Grade 1, 2, or 3, but she knew that she learned to read perfectly in Arabic in Grade 4 when she was about 9 or 10 years old. Besides reading, she also studied religion and math. She seemed to do quite well in school at that time.

I also remember the students sitting beside me in Grade 4 used to copy me on the tests. One of my friends told me to write all the wrong answers first and let them copy and then erase all and do the right ones. It worked because these students stopped copying from others. They had no idea of whether the answers were right or wrong. They just wrote them down. They did not pay attention in class. They did not study.

Jasmine went to school with her cousins. She also had a lot of friends in school. She liked school.

I liked school. It was fun to read. My grandmother didn't pressure us. I lived with my brother, grandmother, two uncles and an aunt who were not married at that time. It was fun to go to school. When we came home everything was ready. So we ate the food and went out to play and then do our homework. It was fun. I was not complaining.

The fact that one of her uncles was a teacher at the school also helped. She behaved herself and did her homework. At that time, it was a common practice for teachers to beat students with some light wire hoses if they did not do well or misbehaved in the classroom. She was rarely beaten up because she was scared, she told me. She probably did not want to be publicly humiliated on report card day, either.

On report card day, teachers used to announce all the students from the highest grade to the failing one, students who passed and who failed. If a student failed and was at the bottom of the class, the rest of the class would chase him or her all the way to his/her house. They would sing a song and call him/her a failure. They found it very effective to those failed students because when they came back the following year they would try to do better. Nobody wanted to be chased home like that or to be called a failure.

Growing up as a Catholic in this African country, Jasmine remembered the religious tension:

I remember at one time the President came up with a rule that everybody should wear hijabs. But we were Catholics and we wouldn't wear a hijab. The situation went really bad. We wore hijabs for a couple of days and then the President

dismissed that rule. They tried to make everything Muslim. They tried to control people. That's why they did that.

Jasmine began her Grade 5 in September 1998 but did not finish it in her home country. She moved to the capital city of a northern African country on March 3, 1999, because of the advice from another uncle. At that time, he was studying in a university there. He thought that schools in that country were better. So her grandmother encouraged her to go for a better education. Jasmine left her home country with her brother, cousins, uncle, and aunt. Her grandmother chose to stay behind.

Life in a Northern African Country: I Was Among the Top 10 in My Class!

After Jasmine arrived in this country with her family, she continued to do Grade 5 in the following school year (1999–2000) at a Catholic school, which was the only school for her fellow students from her home country in that capital city. Because the school did not have enough classrooms, they had to offer a morning and an afternoon session to accommodate all the students. Jasmine went to school in the afternoon for her Grade 5. She switched to the morning session for her Grade 6, 7, and 8.

The classrooms were really big and there were 36 students in her class. They sat in rows. Jasmine did not experience any difficulty moving from her Grade 5 in her home country to Grade 5 in this new country. It was the same system and the same language, Arabic, but somehow she sensed the difference.

I don't know why, but I could remember better in this new place. It was different.

They had different textbooks. Everything was different, but the language was the

same. The subject math was lower back in my home country. The learning there was lower than that in this new place. I think that was the difference.

In order to catch up and do well on all the school subjects, Jasmine began to focus and study really hard. She was also a member of a study group of six girls. They were all her friends in one class. They went together for evening classes and communion classes. If they had trouble in math, they would all go for math classes. They were busy every night. When the exams came, they would be given a 2-week break to study. During those 2 weeks, every day Jasmine and her friends would go to somebody's house and study. The next day they would go to another person's house and study. They just studied and studied. They didn't do anything else because they liked to study all the time.

The teachers at that school were all graduates from the same school. They were very strict with the students. Jasmine told me about her teachers: "They would give us homework every single day and we had to hand it in at 7:30 sharp in the morning. If we didn't, we would get beaten up badly."

I was surprised when Jasmine told me that the principal of that school was her uncle, too. He was related to her family. "There was always someone related to me in school," she said with a smile.

Jasmine thrived in this school and was among the top 10 in her class of 36 students for 2 years. She was an academically strong student and she worked very hard to achieve her goals.

On the report card day, there was a big celebration. The teacher in each class would announce students' names from number 1 to number 10 and gave them

presents. For the rest of the students, they didn't call them in front of people. Students would feel good when they could get something. I won two prizes. I passed and I was among the top 10 in my Grade 6 and 7. I missed my Grade 8 exams. If I had stayed, I would have probably received another prize because I always studied hard. Studying with my friends, I found it easier to memorize things. I used to know all the names for the parts of the human body in Arabic for my biology class.

Jasmine's face lit up when she said this. She seemed to remember the sense of pride and happiness she felt at that time. School was a very important part in her life then.

However, in the wider community, there were a lot of tensions between her people and the locals. Jasmine heard many horror stories about how her people working in the local houses as house maids were killed or abused. She used to be very scared of the local people and never made any friends except talking to one girl neighbor. "Our balconies were connected. So when I came out, she came out and we talked. We didn't go out though. We just talked through the balcony sometimes."

That girl neighbour went to a private girl-only Catholic school, where Jasmine and her friends played basketball with the girls from that school in the evening. They had a lot of fun practicing for tournaments for their own teams.

Unfortunately, that was probably the only positive experience Jasmine had with the local people. Most of her other experiences were quite negative, sometimes even frightening. She told me a story about how she was caught up in a racial conflict between

her people and the local people on a hot summer day in 2000. At the time, she did not realize that her life was actually in danger.

One of my school friends and I were walking home from the soccer practice field when she suggested that we stop by our school. She wanted to wash her hands. The church was full of people on that Thursday. There was a prayer for some people traveling to Australia. They also had invited some actresses to perform a play in a traditional way. So many people came to watch that play. When we were going out we saw many of our people coming and running towards the church. We wondered what had happened, but nobody wanted, or had the time to tell us. They kept pushing us because we were walking out and they were running in. Luckily, we met my aunt and she took us right back into the church. It turned out that dozens of local people were chasing after some of our guys because of a traffic accident involving a local bus driver and a pedestrian. It escalated to a violent fight. When we closed the church door the locals started banging on it. They were trying to find a way to get in, but all these men used an African shield to hold the door. The locals burned the pastor's car outside the church and they pushed it to the door. The door was very hot. And then they put gas in a Pepsi bottle, lit it up and threw it into the church. It was really bad. I had no idea what was happening. We were sleepy during the whole fight. We just slept here and there. My aunt kept taking us from the church to the classrooms and then back to the church, just to keep us away from those local people. After hours and hours of fighting, at last the police came. They chased those locals away. They didn't

arrest anybody. The police used those big police trucks to take us home. Some people were scared. They were worried that the police would take them to jail. But others thought that it was better to get in there than die here. We got in the police trucks and they sent us home. It was bad.

It was still daylight when Jasmine and her friend went into the church. When they finally went home it was already 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning.

Because of those conflicts and tensions, Jasmine's uncle would not let her work with the locals even though she was begging to have a job at that time. It was too dangerous for young people, he would say.

Jasmine was busy preparing for her final exams in Grade 8 when her family's application for refugee status in Canada was approved in May 2002.

I was studying very hard. I was doing the study group. We were getting ready for the finals – math, English, social, biology and chemistry. We had five or six subjects in one day. We needed to pass all the subjects in order to move to the next level.

Jasmine really missed those 3 years in that northern African country. She was happy with who she was and felt very successful with her academic studies then. She had a lot of fun with her friends both in and out of school. However, when she moved to a northern city in Alberta, Canada, to join her uncle and his family, her transition into a Canadian high school was not an easy one.

Life in Canada: My English is Not Good Enough!

Jasmine came directly to this northern city in May 2002 to join her uncle and his family. She spent the first 4 months hanging out with other students from her home country who lived in the same neighbourhood. They used to play basketball at a neighbourhood park, and her uncle was their coach. When school started in September, Jasmine went to Grade 10 at a local high school.

I started Grade 10 at this school in September 2002. There was no Grade 9 for me. My uncle picked this school for me because his son used to go there. Most students from my home country go there. They like to stick together for some reason.

Previously Jasmine studied all her school subjects in Arabic and did very well. She only started learning English after she arrived in Canada. Therefore, the initial language barrier seemed very daunting for her. She remembers this one incident when her school principal asked her to be a translator and realized how limited/limiting her English was to express her ideas:

I remember there was this girl, who had just come from the same northern African country. They took her to a different high school, where there were no Arabic-speakers. So she couldn't communicate with anyone. She didn't know any word in English. Finally the principal called my high school because he knew that our school had many students from my home country. They called me to go and translate for them. I didn't know anything in English then. I knew just a little bit of English words. But I didn't say no. When I talked to this girl on the phone, we

talked for 15 minutes. We talked and laughed in Arabic while the principal and two other people were waiting for me to tell them something. I could only tell them that she did not like it here, that she was scared and that she couldn't understand anything. I only told them one word or one short sentence because my English was not good. They were expecting much more from me. And I remember telling myself, "You thought you knew English and you were just lying.

Fortunately, she met a very good ESL teacher during her first year in that high school.

I started ESL level one with Mrs. M. I was very comfortable with her. She made a lot of students feel this way. She talked softly and clearly. It helped. She pointed out everything well. Everything was good. I somehow understood what she was saying. I don't know how, but I understood her. She always talked slowly and she used her hands.

Jasmine studied only ESL for that year. The school modified the curriculum and taught them ESL math, ESL social studies, and ESL religion in addition to the ESL classes. She did very well for that year.

For Grade 11, Jasmine studied ESL Level 2 and 3 with Mrs. S., who was just there for a year because the regular teacher was on holiday. In Jasmine's memory, Mrs. S was nice and loud. She taught math, science, social studies, and English. Some students found Mrs. S annoying, but Jasmine thought that she was just trying to push them to do well at school. She liked Mrs. S. and didn't have any problems with her.

Jasmine also took Math 14, Science 14, and Religion 15. In addition, she took fashion and cosmetology during that year. The two teachers teaching these two courses were her favourite teachers because in their classes she experienced a sense of connection with her past.

I found cosmetology fun because of the different hands-on activities. You got to put the makeup on the mannequin and do some sewing. I loved sewing, but I did not know how to cut. Back in my home country all my aunts sewed and they taught me how to sew. I don't know how we used to do it, but it was really perfect. We used our own hands to sew our own dolls. Here we used machines. I learned a lot from these two courses. I learned to sew with a machine. I learned the names of the threads and the needles. I didn't know the needle or the thread or the bobbin before. I made a quilt, a hoodie, a skirt, a purse and a bag.

In Grade 12, Jasmine began the self-directed learning program at her high school. She had mixed feelings about this unique education program.

I liked the self-directed learning when I got used to it, especially with English. It was good because it made you think more instead of depending on a teacher all the time to explain things. But sometimes it was hard when it came to science and math. I needed a teacher to help me catch up with something. Even if I asked them for more help, it still was not enough.

Jasmine was not very good at math. When she took Math 24 with Mrs. G, she was motivated to learn. If she didn't understand something, Mrs. G would go through it again.

Jasmine thought that Mrs. G was a very good teacher because she explained well.

However, her other math learning experiences were not as pleasant.

In schools there are some teachers that are not good. In January 2006, I was supposed to take Math 10 pure, but I dropped it because of the teacher. He was not really doing his job. He didn't help when I asked him for help. He would say to me, "Oh, great, a Grade 1 student can even do that. Why are you taking this? You're supposed to be in ESL or something."

Some teachers would tell Jasmine all the time that her English was not good enough to do this or that. She felt deeply hurt and discouraged. I could hear her frustration and anger when she said to me,

Maybe I didn't speak English very well, but for me, I had no problems writing and reading in English. I could understand things. But they just judge you by the way you talk. They would tell you that your English is not good enough so you can't take this. Even my level 4 ESL teacher Mrs. A. told me that. She even made me repeat ESL level 4 when I passed. I got 67 and my friend got 50 something. She kept both of us.

Jasmine couldn't understand why the teacher made her repeat the class. She found ESL level 4 easy because she loved mythologies, short stories, and poetry. She loved reading and writing in English. The teacher brought something new every day and they had exams almost every week. As a matter of fact, Jasmine didn't even notice that she was repeating a class until one of her friends pointed it out to her later.

The other ESL classes were very boring, the level 1, 2, and 3. We did the same things every day, math, grammar. They would hand us papers and we had to fill them out. It was the same routine every day, very boring. That's why I never noticed that I was repeating a class that I didn't even go to because most of the time she would tell me to go to the learning center to do religion or something else. I didn't understand what she told me. She said that my English was weak. But it was only the speaking. I had no problems with my writing.

I shook my head in disbelief as Jasmine told me this story. I wondered when this additional language support might become an obstacle for ESL students like Jasmine. There seemed to be a glass ceiling – a limit to what Jasmine was expected to be able to achieve at school. Therefore, her ideas of jumping into higher level courses were often discouraged by her teachers. I wondered how many ESL students like Jasmine are being artificially maintained in these special kinds of language-based classes.

At the time, Jasmine was so happy because she thought that she was going to pass her ESL level 4 and to take high school English Language Arts (ELA) finally. She wanted to go to university and become a doctor or a pharmacist or work for the United Nations, so she was eager to take those academic and university-bound courses. That was her dream, her story to live for. However, when she wanted to take ELA in summer school, this ESL level 4 teacher told her not to.

She even called my uncle and told him that my English was not good enough and that I shouldn't take English 10-2 in the summertime. She told me to go and drop it because I had already registered. She told me to take something else. I said OK,

just to shut her up. My uncle also told me not to drop it. So I took it and I passed. I took it in the summer school. I didn't tell her though. But she knew I passed it. I think she received the marks when the school started and she didn't say anything to me. She was my advisor and my teacher at the same time. I don't know why she did that to me. I never took the time to ask her or something because I just let it slide. I just wanted to forget it. I wouldn't take it as racist but maybe she had a problem with me.

These negative messages teachers gave to Jasmine, whether it was the low expectations or straight put-downs, or harmful insults, were very injurious to her identity, to her sense of who she was and who she might become. Sadly, the only source of hope for Jasmine at that time was from home. Fortunately, she has a very supportive uncle at home. He always encouraged her to do well at school and spends time helping her with school work.

My uncle always encouraged me when I went home. He makes me feel good about myself. He believes in me. He is really good. But when I came to school I felt like nothing's going to work out. My uncle used to help me do my homework. He used to tell me that I could do well in school. I remember when I took science 10 in the summer school of 2004, he helped me do my homework every day because the summer school is very short and very intensive and I never took science in English before. He helped me go through it and I passed it. In fact, summer school was the only time that I could take high school courses. If I waited till the school year, they wouldn't give me the courses that I actually wanted.

As Jasmine was speaking, I wondered what was going on with the school and why such decisions were made. I wondered why the school seemed reluctant to move ESL students into regular programming.

When Jasmine came back for her fourth year at her high school, taking Grade 12 again in September 2005, she told the school to get a different teacher advisor for her. They did. Mr. M was very nice to Jasmine. No matter what school subjects Jasmine wanted to take, he would register it for her. At that time, Jasmine was struggling to decide which math to take because she was not good at math.

If I asked him for Math 10 pure, he would give me the slip. After a couple of days, I dropped it and asked if I could get Math 20 pure and then Math 20 applied. He gave it to me, but I dropped it again because of the teachers. They were no help at all. One day they made me really pissed. I went to this teacher for help. But when he saw me coming he just left and ran away. He was my study seminar teacher, so he knew that I was coming and he ran away. And then this student teacher, he couldn't even figure out how to put in the graph in this big calculator. I sat there for almost an hour and he was just on the calculator trying to figure out how to put in the graph and he couldn't. I got pissed. That's when I dropped it. Holy! I couldn't take it. And math was my weakness so that's why I dropped it.

I sensed a lot of anger in Jasmine's words. There seemed to be a shift in the language she used to describe this experience. Sadly, Jasmine was not the only student that had had those very negative experiences within the school. Many of her fellow students had similar experiences. They often sat together and talked about it.

We were scared. If we told the principal he would tell the teachers and the teachers would turn against us even more. So it would be bad. That's why we just kept it to ourselves. We didn't tell the principal. Actually we had this counsellor, who spoke our language and worked at our school. We went to him and we told him about those teachers. But he warned us not to take any action because if we did it might get worse. We thought about it and agreed that the teachers would turn against us. That was what he told us too. He told us just not to bother. Even if we spoke up they might do that to a coming new student. They might do worse. So that's why it's better not to let them know what they're doing.

I sighed inside as I listened to Jasmine. School was not a safe and comfortable place for Jasmine and many of her peers. Knowing that her uncle was always supportive of her efforts to do well at school through the stories she had told me, I changed the topic and asked Jasmine why she didn't let her uncle know what was happening at school at that time.

But when I went to school, I felt discouraged. Of course, I didn't tell my uncle what was happening in school because my uncle talks too much and he would react. I didn't want any fist fights. We only told the school counsellor. He even agreed with us that we should not tell the principal of the school what the teachers were doing. He thought if we did, the principal was going to tell the teachers, who would still be mean. They were not going to tell us exactly what was wrong, but they would have some changes and we wouldn't like that. The teachers did not treat some of the students well at that time. If I told him anything, he would go to

school and mess up everything. He knew all the teachers. He is like a politician.

He knows everybody. He's crazy. So that's why I didn't tell him anything.

In fact, Jasmine never thought of telling her uncle at that time. She seemed to have been caught between a rock and a hard place, feeling powerless both at school and at home. Looking back, she thought that maybe she should have told him. She knew that he would have done something about it. He would have pushed those teachers into doing something different. She wished that she could go back and tell him why she decided to leave school, or rather, why she was pushed out of school.

I decided to stay out of school in September 2006. I didn't go back to school since then. I stopped. I felt like even if I did better I wouldn't get anywhere. I don't know. It was only me. I was feeling down about everything at that time. I had a lot of goals, but it felt like I wouldn't reach them even if I tried to work hard at something.

Outside school, the youth community that Jasmine was a part of was also falling apart. With deep sadness, she told me:

All the youth used to be OK. But now some of them drink alcohol, others do drugs and girls get pregnant. Everybody used to be happy and respectful. Nobody used to do stuff that was illegal or bad. We used to be together. We used to have community youth parties and meetings. The president then was very good. She was very creative and talented. She came up with good ideas and made people actually want to come to meetings and talk about things. We had barbecues, played games and had a good time, all kinds of names for the parties, classic

parties, dressed and pressed parties, red carpet parties. We invented those names. But then some people gossiped behind her and she decided that she did not want anything to do with us and the community any more. So it collapsed and all of it went down. The last president for the group was very careless. He lost the money that we raised for the community. We would give the money to someone in need just in case something happened in the community. He ate money. He ate people's money. He was careless calling people for meetings. Everything went down. People used to be happy and stay together and have fun. Now there is a lack of communication between people and everybody went to the wrong direction. I am just worried about the next generation that's coming. The community actually would love to bring the youth back together. But when they call the children to have meetings with them, the children won't go. They don't like the idea of old people telling them what to do. Yet they themselves can't bring it back together again.

Jasmine thought that if her uncle decided to do something about the situation, it might work because he knew how to be with the children. However, he was busy taking care of the younger children with homework club and activities every Saturday from 1 to 3 p.m. He invited children from Grades 7 to 10 to come, get help, play and have fun. He had some government funding for that program and the children liked that program.

Although Jasmine's high school has a fourth year program for returning students called Ascension, Jasmine felt that she was running out of time and that she had nowhere

to go to continue her education. A dream she had at that time was very telling about how she felt cornered and blocked to move forward.

I had a dream two years ago around this time. I was sleeping in the living room in my aunt's house after braiding my friend's hair. I hated sleeping there but I did. Then I had a dream that the dining room window was open and that there were three wolves outside walking by the backyard. I saw rain. So I got up to close the window before they got in the house. But by the time I got closer to the dining table one wolf outside the window already started coming in through the window. He was soaking wet. So I tried to run to close the door, but I couldn't move. I was just standing there. I couldn't move back and forth. I couldn't scream. I couldn't do anything. I never saw the other two wolves again. So that dream makes me think a lot about something's holding me back when I'm trying to move forward. That was the weirdest dream, but I never sleep in the living room again. I never had dreams like that before.

After leaving school, Jasmine worked at different kinds of jobs. In fact, she had begun working on a part time basis since she was in Grade 10. Her first job was a catering job in the summer of 2003. She worked 8 to 10 hours a day, once or twice a week.

I did not like the schedule because I worked very late and it was hard to get home. I had to call somebody to come and pick me up and then they got pissed because sometimes I finished work around 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. Sometimes I just slept over at my friend's. That was not good.

It took Jasmine a while to find her second job at a machinery company. One of her friends found this job and asked her to go and check it out together. They were both hired to start the night shift there. So every day after school Jasmine and her friend went to work. She had worked there for 3 years since Grade 11. "I liked working there, but it was too far away from my house. It took me almost 2 hours to get home, which I really hated because I hated going home really late."

However, Jasmine met a good friend there. This friend came from one of the Asian countries and was her reference. He often encouraged her to go back to school. He himself went to school part time and at the time of our conversation he was promoted to become a manager.

Jasmine also worked at a Dollar Store for 4 months, but she didn't like that job. She then worked at a Tim Hortons before going to a local college in September 2007. She took English 20-1 and math because she was told to.

Because it was student funding, I felt like they were taking control of me somehow. They decided what I should take. So I didn't like it and I dropped out. There were two courses that I really wanted to take so that I could get into the goal I wanted. But they kept saying the same thing that my English was not good enough and that I wouldn't survive in that field and all this stuff. So I just dropped out. I would just save my own money and go to school and then pay for myself.

So she did. She found another job and worked really hard to save some money for school.

I get up at 6 in the morning and give myself 20 minutes to shower and get ready to catch a bus at 6:20. The work starts at 7. I like it that way because I finish at 3:30. I go home and just read my books.

Jasmine's aunt had advised her to take business because she could have her own business and work in a lot of places. At first, Jasmine didn't like the idea. She didn't want to do it. When her aunt said that she could even open a salon, she thought more about it. It so happened that one of her friends knew that Jasmine was struggling to find a better school to go to and invited her to come along to talk with an education counsellor at another local college. Jasmine finally decided to go to that college and study business.

My uncle is going with me to register for the business administration and marketing program at that college. He said the form is hard to fill out. I think he just wants to make sure everything is correct. I can't wait to go back to school. September seems really far away.

I was so happy and relieved to hear the excitement in her voice as she shared this great news with me. She wanted to go back to her home country and open her own business one day.

I am trying to open my own business back home when I am done. I want to go back home. My uncle thinks if I go there I will have better opportunities and better jobs. My uncle is a businessman too. He is in He said this is going to be good. The English-educated people will have better opportunities than the Arabic-speaking people. I know both English and Arabic now. So it's better. It helps in the workplaces in my home country. Most of the African countries use either

French or English as one of the official languages. So it will help me to communicate with them.

Jasmine wondered why it had taken her so long to apply for Canadian citizenship. She just sent in her application package on January 28, 2008. She wanted to have a Canadian passport so that she could travel safely back to her home country.

Toward the end of our third conversation on June 17, 2008, I asked Jasmine what it had been like for her to participate in this research study. She said,

It makes me feel good to talk about these things that I have been keeping for so long. Nobody ever asked me to talk about these things and I thought I don't remember anything from way back. It helped me to think back. It was a good experience for me. I learned to remember.

It was very difficult to say goodbye to Jasmine and I didn't know how and when to tell her that I was moving to Winnipeg in a week for a new job. So I took Jasmine to my office in Education North, which was almost empty except several psychology textbooks that were left behind on the shelf. I broke the news to her there and she was very surprised and asked me why I didn't tell her earlier. She was very sad that I was leaving. But she also told me that she felt happy for me that I had this new job.

I was very surprised when Jasmine showed great interest in the psychology textbooks and asked me if she could have them. She took almost all of them. I gave her a shopping bag to hold the books. She said that she was very interested in studying psychology at university, but was told that she wouldn't be good at it and that it was very

difficult to find a job in that field. Someone couldn't get a job in 20 years. I asked who said that. Some teachers at her high school, she replied. I shook my head and sighed.

I walked Jasmine to the bus stop and hugged her goodbye, wishing her good luck for her studies at the college in September 2008.

A Narrative Account of Victoria – George Buck

I had received the contact information for my participant some time earlier, and several times we had scheduled meetings, but one or the other of us cancelled because of one reason or another. At last, however, we agreed to meet in early January in a popular Tim Hortons. That day turned out to be sunny, and a little warmer than previous days. I arrived about 10 minutes before the interview, purchased a large mint tea, and found a nice table in the corner, where I could see the entrance clearly. As with most Tim Hortons, the place was busy and fairly noisy. Since I had not met my participant before, but knew that she was a young woman, I kept a close eye on the entrance so as not to miss her arrival. As I waited, two women sat down at the table next to me to eat their lunch. Although there was considerable ambient noise that tended to meld conversations together into an unintelligible din, I could hear their conversation clearly. While I tried not to eavesdrop, my attention was drawn to their conversation when one asked the other, “Is that guy in the corner Brian Mason of the NDP?” I suddenly felt quite self-conscious, as I realized that I was not only noticed, but that, at least to those women, I reminded them of a fairly high-profile local politician. I did not want that sort of attention, so I partially hid my face by picking up a newspaper, and then redirected my attention to the entrance. I also glanced at my watch, and noticed that my participant was 15 minutes late. A few minutes later, a thin, shorter woman entered the place with a tentative step and glance. I stood up and approached her, as I thought that this was my participant.

I had guessed correctly, and after brief introductions, I asked her to sit at my table. I offered to either buy her a beverage, or if she preferred, we could move to the restaurant

next door. She seemed very uneasy with my offers, but she agreed to a hot chocolate when I pointed out that I had already been drinking a tea. After explaining the study, and the consent form, Victoria seemed to relax quite a bit. I took a moment to set up the recorder, and again noticed considerable attention from nearby tables. I put the recorder on top of the paper napkin dispenser so that it would not be as visible as it might be sitting on the table by itself.

Victoria started by apologizing for missing our last scheduled meeting, explaining that she had to take her cousin to emergency because she had been quite ill. I asked if her cousin was better, and Victoria replied in the affirmative. She explained that her cousin had an infection “because she went out in the cold.” I then moved the conversation to her experiences in school. Victoria asked whether I meant just about her experiences in Canada. I said that would be helpful, but why not start at the very beginning.

She said, “Well back home [Somalia] ... I started from what we call a nursery [school].” Victoria continued, stating that she went there for two years, following which she went to primary school, which covered Grades 1 through 7. Following primary, she entered secondary school, which had three grades similar to senior high schools here. Victoria stated that she was in the third grade in secondary when she came to Canada, “When I got here I went to high school.” She quickly added that because she did not have a diploma from her school “back home,” and because school officials presumed that because she was from Africa, and therefore could not speak English well, she was placed into Grade 10 and into an ESL program. “I was 18 so they say well, since you’re 18 we’re gonna allow you to be here until you are 20.” Being surprised at her statement

about the assessment of her English, I noted that she spoke English quite well. Victoria stated that she grew up speaking English, because “my mom is from a different country, my father is from a different country, and they don’t know each other’s language.” This was quite a revelation to me. English, not her mother’s or father’s first language, had been the common language of the household. When I inquired further about this, Victoria said, “Yeah, English is the way we communicate.” Given that information, I asked Victoria why she did not protest when they placed her in ESL. She said that even though she took a test and did well, the view was that because she was from Africa and spoke English with an accent, she would be better off in an ESL program. She said, “So I actually went to the ESL classes I was supposed to be taking for a year, but I only was there for 2 months.” When asked why she left the class, her response was, “Everything they were teaching was just making me sleepy ... it was boring.” The boredom led to other problems in the class. Victoria said that she often said, “I told them [the teachers] you know what, I am not really happy in this class because I know what you are teaching.” Such comments led to arguments between Victoria and the teacher on an almost daily basis, culminating in a confrontation where, according to Victoria, the teacher told her that she could not stay in the class. Rather than being excluded, Victoria said that the teacher indicated that Victoria could attend regular classes, but by this time, her interest in other classes was also at an ebb.

Along with ESL, Victoria stated that she took some regular Grade 10 classes, but found them to be mundane and boring, “so I had to drop out.” I probed this area, since the answer seemed too perfunctory. Victoria said that she had already done most of the

courses in which she was placed in Alberta, “I did biology in my country, I did chemistry, I did physics, I did, like comm. ... so I took everything, every kind of math, everything.” She added, “Actually we have more subjects than here. We have 12 subjects.” The conversation moved to support and requirements, where Victoria stated that another big problem was that no one in the school seemed to care about her and her particular goals. She said that she had told her teachers that she wanted to be a social worker, but that in order to qualify, she needed to have English 30. Since she was a native English speaker and had taken English courses in Somalia, she had inquired repeatedly why she could not take English 30, and was told that she could not be admitted until she passed English 10 and 20. Victoria stated,

Well I really know what I want to do because when I went to secondary school back home I had a career choice, I wanted to be a doctor ... but then when I came here they're like oh, you don't have a biology, you don't have a science and all that. You cannot be a doctor, have to choose another career.

As a result of her experiences and frustration, Victoria stated that she dropped out of school, but this was not the end of her quest for education. “I tried to go to [a vocational college]. When I went there I applied for EI [Employment Insurance], because I was working so I had enough hours to collect EI.” I asked about her work, and Victoria said that she had been working since shortly after her arrival in Canada. Victoria explained that she had worked in an office doing tasks such as photocopying and delivery of completed jobs. Working was necessary, she said, to support herself, her mother, her

brother, and several stepbrothers and stepsisters back home. Her father had passed away, and that was one of the factors leading her mother to come to Canada.

She had left her job in order to provide sufficient time to take classes at the vocational college. “My plan was just going for upgrading because I wanted to get my high school diploma.” Her plan was to pursue social work, but what she was offered soon turned out to be disappointing. Victoria said that she was placed in a program designed to facilitate the transition from school to work, and that the program entailed general courses in math and English. She noted, “The math they teach it doesn’t have any level, English they teach doesn’t have any level... it’s just general.” She complained about her program, but felt that no one listened. She added, “I just can’t understand this business, so they really don’t care about you that much, they just want the money.” She continued by saying that she felt that the program was a real waste of her time, and that it was likely that she would not qualify for social work. In consequence, she left the vocational college and said that her goal was then nursing.

Victoria found that because of her age, she could not return to regular public school. In consequence, she found a job entailing home care for the elderly in the evenings and remaining in their dwelling overnight. Victoria thought that this sort of work would provide her with experience relevant to nursing. She said that she really did not like the job very much but that opportunities for better jobs were scarce, “Because some of the jobs I apply [to] they said oh you need your high school diploma and I don’t have it, and I feel bad.” Victoria expanded on her goals and said that she had applied to attend another college which offered a nursing program, “So after I finish the nursing

program I'll be free and maybe I can work daytime and then I can take part time courses to get my high school diploma." We discussed her goals beyond the nursing course and the high school diploma, "and then I can go back to school, probably try to be a doctor... And if I finish and get whatever I want to get, I'm gonna go back home... maybe try to open up a clinic or something." She noted that she did not want to remain in Canada. I asked what about the country she did not like, and besides the prolonged cold, Victoria said that it was the seemingly extreme emphasis about money. "Everything is money." She added that while money was necessary, she thought that there was not such an emphasis on it in her home country. We talked about how after 18 the province no longer pays for education, but that in Somalia, education through high school completion is publicly funded, even if a student is an older person.

We talked about what occupies her time besides work and thoughts of long-term goals. Victoria stated that she teaches children at her church's Sunday school, and in addition she was involved in a fashion show. "We are trying to host a fashion show for Black history next month and I am organizing it, so it's like most of my time I have to run up and down and look for models and find them."

The conversation returned to the issue of obtaining a high school diploma, and Victoria described her brother's experiences in high school. Being younger, he was permitted to attend public high school for a longer period, but now he was at a high school for older students. Victoria added, "which is only [for] 1 year." She noted that her brother was quite happy at high school, and that she felt that having to go to another school because of age was extremely unfair. Victoria added that given her experience and

that of her brother, she wanted to write a letter to whoever is in charge of schools in Alberta, but that she never actually did so. I explained that the person in charge was the Minister of Education, who is an elected official, and as such is answerable to the public. I added that while it would be unlikely for a single letter to cause change, by not letting politicians know that there either is a problem, or that one is not happy with conditions, then it is likely that they will not be aware of anything amiss. Victoria said that she indeed might write to the Minister in the future, but that she did not know who he was, or what his address was. As Victoria was beginning to become restless, was looking around quite a bit, and received a call on her cell phone, which signaled to me that the meeting would soon be over, I told her that I would provide her with that information at our next meeting. I also said that if she wanted the interview to end, that was fine, as it was her choice.

Victoria said that would be fine, but she added that getting her high school diploma was also a matter of family pride. She explained that while her aunt has 10 children, none of them have a high school diploma, but that her cousin, who had to take out a student loan to go to school, did finish, and received a high school diploma. So, to provide a good example to other members of her family, Victoria felt that getting her high school diploma was important. Of course, she added, it is mainly about creating opportunities for jobs and other education. She then asked me about myself, and I told her how I started out being a teacher, and that I was drawn to learn more about various things, and that this led to me pursuing an academic career. I also said that I was only the second person in my family to have earned a doctorate. Victoria said that she bet that I

enjoyed listening to stories, and when I replied in the affirmative, she said that she sometimes made presentations with a local church group. I asked her what that was about, and she replied,

My father died when I was so young and I ... grew up with my stepfather who is so mean to me. My mom was there but she has seven kids... and most of the time I live[d] with my grandma, then I moved back with my mom, and my mom she had a restaurant, but in Africa when you have something to get money people get jealous of you.

I replied that jealousy also occurs here, and that if one appears to be getting ahead, then this may cause others to be resentful. Victoria agreed and added, "Well in Africa we have witches and stuff like that. And it really does work, when they do it on you it really does work." She elaborated on how she was blind for almost a year, and when she recovered she worked even harder both at her mother's restaurant and at school. She felt that if her father had been alive, then she might not have had to work as hard. She told me, "I cry when I think of not having a father." When I recalled the stepfather, Victoria said that he drank a great deal, and that he would often get into fights with Victoria. "He doesn't like me that much," she said. So, her talks at the local church group were about contending with the loss of a parent and the problems with alcohol abuse in a household.

At this point I noticed Victoria craning her neck to see something outside the Tim Hortons. She told me that someone was here to pick her up, so we agreed to meet the following week.

The day of our next meeting was among the coldest that winter. In fact, my car would not start that morning, and I had to borrow another vehicle in order to get to the Tim Hortons on time. I arrived before the time agreed upon and again purchased a large mint tea. Although there were only a few other people in the Tim Hortons, someone was sitting at the table that I had occupied the previous time. I scouted around for another table that was out of the way, and which afforded a view of the entrance, but none were either apparent or available. I sat down at a table nearby my preferred table and read. As before, my interviewee was late, but this proved to be beneficial, for the person occupying my preferred table left after about 10 minutes. I quickly moved to that table, and waited. Victoria eventually arrived, and was most apologetic. I again offered to buy her either a hot drink or lunch, and she indicated that she would like another hot chocolate.

After we were settled, I again resumed recording, and asked her about whether she had any further insights regarding our conversation from the previous week. Rather than respond to my question, Victoria stated that she had wonderful news. She had been accepted into the nursing program at the college. What was more, classes would be starting in a week's time. She also stated proudly that her application for a student loan had been approved. I asked whether this meant that she was going to quit her job, but Victoria responded that the amount of money in the loan would be inadequate for all of her financial needs, and in any case, she could still work at night because she could sleep after 11:00. She explained that it was called a sleep shift, and that the only time she had to interrupt her sleep was when one of the people that she assisted required something,

and that was not very often. Victoria added that while “I’m happy ’cause I have to do something, so I’m really looking forward to that,” she realized that taking an educational program while working would entail considerable time and effort. She said, “Yeah, 5 hours a day class and then maybe 2 to 3 hours homework; important to do.” I expressed my joy and congratulations on her achievement, and tried to steer the conversation back to the issue of the high school diploma by stating that she had successfully made the first step on her life goal. Victoria said that she was overjoyed with her acceptance at CDI, and so was one of her former teachers at the high school she had attended. I remarked that I had thought that last week she had said that one of the reasons she had left high school was because no one cared, and that she had had conflicts with the ESL teacher. Victoria replied that while she still thought no one really cared about her academically, the ESL teacher had become her friend. In fact, Victoria stated, “She’s like my, my best friend ... and she’s so worried about me not going to school.” I asked whether there were other teachers at the school who showed interest and support, but Victoria replied that there were not. She said that she believed that the ESL teacher cared because Victoria had told her about her life, and that led the teacher to care. Victoria added that the teacher was also concerned about Victoria’s brother. Later in our conversation, Victoria mentioned to her former ESL teacher that she discussed writing to the Minister of Education about her experiences, and that the teacher thought it was a good idea.

I again probed the issue of the high school diploma, and Victoria responded, “Yeah, I will just see if I pass [the college nursing courses] and everything is going OK for me, maybe I’ll try to go in September.” I asked what she needed to complete the

requirements for the high school diploma, and Victoria replied that while she initially thought that she was almost done, her recent good fortune in being accepted in a nursing program “changed my mind, from being a social worker.” Victoria explained that she really wanted to pursue becoming a doctor, and so nursing was just one step along the path to that goal, but that “now I need all my science classes.” She added that she thought that a community college would be the best venue for her studies, although she worried about the cost, “‘cause I guess every class is like \$800.” I suggested that she might inquire about possible course challenge exams that might enable her to get credit for some courses. I added that even if this were not possible, if she found the courses easy, then she could excel and get the best grades possible. Victoria said that she would consider what I said, but that her goal was to complete the requirements for the high school diploma as quickly as possible, as she wanted to get on with her life goal of becoming a doctor, “but in order for me to be a doctor I guess I need my high school diploma.” Victoria also expressed impatience at how long the educational process takes, but that she thought it best to try and reach her educational goals while younger, rather than older. I agreed with her ideas, and added that while individuals can be lifelong learners, I explained about how long it took me to get from high school through the completion of the Ph.D. I added that when one is younger, one usually has more energy than years on. Victoria agreed and added, “‘cause when I grow older I feel like what’s the point.”

Victoria then said that she thought that she had provided me with as much information as she could provide, and asked whether we had to meet again. I replied that

it was up to her, but that often after the passage of some time, recollections and other ideas might come to mind. Victoria said that she preferred not to meet again because she was certain that she had told me everything, and that she would likely be extremely busy with her new courses. I thanked her for meeting with me, and wished her the best of luck. Now that Victoria has embarked on another learning path, it remains to be seen whether that path will intersect with the one leading to the high school diploma.

A Narrative Account of Andrew – D. Jean Clandinin

Our first meeting (April 16, 2008) was in a coffee shop, a noisy, friendly spot where the cappuccino machine hissed and steamed in the background. Sean, a high school teacher on sabbatical, knew Andrew and invited him to participate in our study. Sean had offered to introduce Andrew and I, and we had planned to meet the week before (April 11, 2008) at this coffee shop. However, Sean and I waited for an hour or so and Andrew had not come. I had been nervous the week before and even more nervous this time. I worried that Andrew would not be comfortable telling his stories to someone who was part of an educational institution. I wondered how Andrew felt and wondered why he had not come the week before.

Sean had come along with Andrew this time and, after he introduced us, he retreated to another spot in the café and left Andrew and I to talk. After we went through the ethics materials and Andrew signed, we began to talk. This was the first of three talks that Andrew and I had. Each one stretched past an hour. Our meetings stretched over about 6 months, from April to October, and we had talked briefly again. This first one was in the coffee shop but subsequent ones were in my office at the university.

Andrew was about 19, tall, with the height of a basketball player. Even dressed in jeans and casual clothes, it was hard not to notice him and I learned to listen very carefully as he spoke softly and carefully. As we came to know each other a bit, we often laughed together and I began to see his gentle sense of humour. When we met again in the fall of 2008, Andrew's clothes had become trendier and I sensed he was changing his style.

While we began with his stories of school when he told me he had gradually drifted away from school in the middle of his Grade 12 year after he was kicked off the basketball team, I came to see the layers of family and community support in which his life was nested. He had been out of school since about January of 2007, more than a year at the time of our first meeting.

Relationships

As Andrew and I talked, I began to see his life as situated in complex nested relationships. Over the months of our conversations, Andrew gradually shared more and more about who he was in his family. At first I learned he lived at home with his mother, a nurse, and often spoke of his two older brothers, now both married, who owned a restaurant. His brothers both finished high school and also were involved with sports. He spoke fondly of his nieces and nephews and of spending quality time with them. He said,

I have a lot of like kids in my family and me and one of my cousins we're like the oldest so usually...there's babysitting that needs to be done. We obviously have to do it so I'm usually like around a lot of kids and both my brothers have two kids.

As we spent more time together I learned that his mother had come to Canada from one of the islands in the West Indies and had first settled in New Brunswick before moving to Edmonton. He was born in Edmonton. His father was no longer a central figure in his life.

He spoke of being close with his brothers but also of being “close with cousins.” As he spoke more of his life, stories of a family that was spread from Edmonton to an island in the West Indies began to be told. He spoke of how his mom, grandmother, aunts, and cousins had travelled to the West Indies a couple of years ago to visit cousins and aunts and uncles who still lived there. They stayed with his grandmother’s sister and, as he described his time there, I learned that family, sports and a strong church connection held the family together over the distances. He spoke of cousins who lived there who also played sports, “soccer, basketball, cricket.” As he told me about these cousins, he spoke of cousins who also moved to Edmonton about 6 years ago and how the strength of family connections persisted over the years and miles.

Andrew indicated “all of my mom’s sisters and brothers are here” in Alberta, mostly in Edmonton with one in a community just north of Edmonton. Later he said one was in another place in the Caribbean. He is also still connected with his father’s family who also live in Edmonton. As he spoke, I learned of his mom’s cousins and one of his grandmother’s sisters and children who also live here.

Family matters to Andrew. The layers of relationships run deep as they stretch across generations and miles. While there was no doubt that family mattered to Andrew, Andrew also mattered to his family. In our third conversation, I was just beginning to understand all the people who lived in Andrew’s extended family. As Andrew said, “We’re pretty close all of us. We hang out pretty much every weekend.” Church was one of the places where they all came together. Family and the church were bound together.

Being a Responsible Member of His Family

As Andrew shared stories of helping out by taking care of his brothers' children, of working in the restaurant his brothers own, of helping out with the foster children who came to stay in his home, and of trying to support his extended family members, I had a strong sense that he had learned to live a story of being a responsible family member.

Paying his own way appeared to be part of this. Since he was old enough to hold a job, Andrew has worked to earn money to support himself while living at home. While he was in high school, he worked at a store in a large mall. When he left school, he worked first for a grocery store, and, for a while, also worked in construction. Eventually he quit the grocery store and kept working in construction. By the time I saw him in the fall of 2008, he was working at a car lot.

Belonging to a Church

The church connection was a strong influence in the stories that Andrew learned to live and tell in his family. His extended family has a strong connection to a particular faith. I sense the church has been part of the extended family's life from before they came to Canada.

I learned of the church connection in the first conversation when Andrew told me that his mother had moved him to the Logos school. He said,

Well, my family is Christian so my mom thought it would be good for me to go to a school like that so she moved me from elementary to that 'cause that was the first year it actually opened up so she decided to put me into there.

In our second conversation I spoke of his faith and he responded by telling me, “I always have been going to church since I was little and I still go.” As we talked he spoke of how “the youth pastor and me get along really well...and we always play basketball every Sunday...so it’s good.” As we spoke more of the church connection he began to speak of how his whole family goes to the church. Later, in the third conversation, he spoke of the church as the place where his extended family connects on a weekly basis.

He also spoke of bible study groups and church events on Fridays and “then usually on Sundays a bunch of us will go play basketball at the school associated with the church.” As he said, “They let us use it, like they let all the church members use the gym that they have to do sports and whatever it is. So we usually do that on Sundays.”

As I listened to Andrew’s stories, I began to see how his life with basketball and the church were interwoven. As Andrew tells his story, sports was a major thread in junior and senior high school but also in his life in the church and in the community. Even after he left the high school, he continued to play basketball at the YMCA, in the community and at the church.

Playing Sports

Andrew’s love for, and ability in, a range of sports created connections for him in his family where his cousins, both here in Edmonton and in the West Indies, also played sports. His mother and his brothers approved of, and encouraged him in, his love of sports. His love of sports also connected him to the church where his youth pastor encouraged him to continue to play and to develop as an athlete.

Sports seemed like an intergenerational activity that cut across the places and people of Andrew's extended family. The first mention of sports was when Andrew said "I was playing soccer when I was around, in Grade 4 I started playing soccer. I was just playing that on the school team and a club team." He played soccer "until Grade 7 and then after that I started playing basketball...that was part of the junior high school and the community. I was playing both." He played both sports until he was at the end of Grade 8 or the start of Grade 9. He stopped playing soccer, because

two sports was just too hard 'cause in school I was playing basketball for the school and then soccer I was playing for the community and the club teams, and it was kind of hard to do two sports every day.

Andrew said he liked both sports,

but I just figured that I was playing basketball in the school so that could have got me better than playing soccer outside of school. If I was playing both of them in the school then it would have been a tough decision.

His intention was to "figure out which one I want to do and just focus on that one and get better at that one sport."

As I listened to Andrew tell of the place of sports in his life, he said, "It has always been about basketball in junior high too, but, like the teachers in junior high, they seemed more caring and understanding so I kinda like got along with them, like really well." Sports were the central thread in his life and it was being able to play sports, particularly basketball, that kept him involved.

I'd just go to school and play basketball and I had good times in doing like school stuff, so, and in high school, it was a big change from how the teachers were in junior high to high school so then that's like when I was, I just like really focused on just wanting to play basketball.

Andrew continued to play sports, mainly basketball, both in and out of school, during his junior high school years. He spoke of the support of his junior high school gym teacher whose daughter he met while playing "club basketball." By the end of junior high school he had to choose one sport and concentrate on it and he chose basketball. He did, however, mention that when he was in Grade 11 he played some volleyball on the school team "for fun."

When it came time to choose a high school, Andrew selected the high school because of their interest in having him play basketball. As he said, "Cause I just liked the, I had been talking to the coach since I was in, like Grade 6, so, kinda like had a bond there so I decided to go there." He agreed when I said, "So it's been about basketball for a long time." Andrew's story of himself was composed around being a basketball player.

In all of our conversations, sports, particularly basketball, came up repeatedly. He spoke of playing basketball on the university campus with his cousin who was studying there, of playing at the Y, of being recruited by professional teams. Even after he was out of school, he continued to practice,

with, like guys that I know that play on the college teams so I just, so I keep up with them and like, then I can keep up with anybody else and once a week I go

and practice with the team that they have now. My cousin plays on the university team so I practice with them.

When we talked in April and May, he said he continued to play basketball 3 days a week. Even as he began compose who he wanted to be and what he wanted to do in his future career, he wanted to continue to be involved with sports in some way.

While it is difficult for Andrew to speak about how talented and skilled he is at basketball, I learned from listening closely that his high school team has traveled extensively to other countries to play and that Andrew was an excellent player on the team.

Sports, particularly playing basketball, provided the coherence that held his life together. Without understanding his desire to play sports and his excellence as a basketball player, it is difficult to understand his stories of school.

Making Sense Through Music

As he spoke of his love for Rap and Hip-Hop, Andrew told me that in the music people like to talk about their life and like how they went to school and things happened and they had to drop out whether to like take care of their family and stuff so, like listening to that, it makes me think that I'm not the only one who had, like the problem where I got unfortunate and had to deal with all that stuff. So it keeps me going too.

Andrew himself does some rapping and was part of a musical group when he was in Grade 10. They performed at the opening ceremonies for a big basketball tournament

when he was in Grade 10. I can only imagine the confidence he must have felt performing in front of such a large crowd.

Going to School

Andrew's whole school career was spent in Edmonton. He went to one elementary school up until Grade 5 when his mother moved him to an academically oriented, publicly funded Christian school. Later Andrew told me that his mother wanted him to gain something extra from the program as he had been doing well in school. He said,

'Cause it was like really, a lot of like people were really smart and I like, I was doing really good so she just decided to test me and see how I would do in there and I did good.

I wondered whether he wanted to move to that school but, as he said, "It didn't really matter to me. A school is a school." I wondered whether he was concerned about losing his friends, but he said they "all lived in the same area so I still got to see them, so it wasn't that bad." While he said little about the program at the school, he did like the teachers there and made "friends and got along well." He liked being in a special section, the Logos section, of the school. As he said,

It was a good school. It was easy to meet new people 'cause there was like your own section compared to like the regular program so you were associating with like all those kids and you were in all their classes all day so it wasn't that bad to meet people.

He returned to a neighborhood school for junior high school. As he said,

Junior high, well it was like all of my friends that went to my previous elementary so we all went to the same junior high 'cause that was close by our house so I still got to hang out with them too.

He described his junior high experiences in positive terms noting that

in junior high the teachers, they would go out of their way, like if they see that you were like struggling or something, they'd go out of their way to help you. But when I went to high school, they just seemed like, if you wanted to get something done, you'd have to come after school, they wouldn't really help you during class and like, that's when you remember most of the stuff, so it was kind of difficult.

Two junior high school teachers were particularly noted: the gym teacher whose daughter he met playing club ball and his construction teacher. He said the gym teacher told him he could "go to her and she'd help me out, it doesn't matter when, so that's why I kind of liked her." His construction teacher told Andrew he saw him as "really dedicated to what I was doing so he said if I needed anything like through construction or homework wise he would help me too."

In junior high school Andrew spoke of liking mathematics because of "how the teacher taught it. He made it more fun than just teaching it."

The junior high school basketball coach was, as Andrew described him, "just strictly basketball."

He wasn't really like anything during school wise, 'cause I remember a couple of times I, I wouldn't, I'd uh, have a basketball game the night before and then I'd

like sleep in during school and I know I'd skip, uh, skipped a day and then we'd have a basketball game that same day and I wasn't planning on going to school so then he called me and he asked me if I was going to go to the game and he'd know I didn't go to school so I think it was just strictly basketball.

He selected the high school because of the encouragement of the basketball coach and was there until mid-Grade 12. Andrew chose this school because he was recruited to go there.

By the time he was in high school, Andrew was not particularly interested in any subject area. As he said,

I was interested just 'cause I know I needed that to go somewhere else with basketball, but it wasn't really something, like I'd make sure I'd get like a high percentage, I'd just make sure I'd get like the passing grade just so I could keep playing. So I wasn't really putting all my hard work into it.

Interrupting His Stories to Live By

In mid-Grade 12 Andrew was kicked off the basketball team because of “a situation.”

A couple of guys on the team went to the coach and told him a couple of things that weren't necessarily true and then there wasn't like, I really didn't defend myself in the matter. I just kind of let them say what they said and just left it at that. So then that got me off the team...I really only went to the school 'cause of

basketball-wise. Then I get to play at the end of the day, so when that was taken away, I didn't have any real motivation to keep going to school.

As I pushed to learn more, I learned that, for Andrew, he

did not go deep and defend myself 'cause it's, they were captains of the team so it was their word against mine....I was really just there to play basketball at the end of the day, so when that was gone then I was like, nothing else to really stay for school 'cause that was really what kept me in school was knowing that I got to play basketball at the end of the day.

As I pushed to try to understand why he did not resist being taken off the basketball team, he said,

It was really two against one 'cause two captains against me so really, that really, it was like a lose-lose situation. Even if I said my point, two against one, not really a matter of, I didn't really think I'd get believed so I didn't really figure I should just explain myself so I just let them say what they had to say.

When I asked about his mother's response, he said, "Well I didn't really tell her like how the situation went 'cause I didn't want to escalate so I just like, I just left it at that." I wonder about how he told his mother and how difficult that must have been for him to speak about being taken off the basketball team and for her to hear about it. Andrew spoke of being angry, and at one point, said,

I was like more in a state of shock than anything that they would actually say that because we were like supposed to be like a team and when you're a team you're like, if anything you stick up for each other, not try and do things like that.

Later, in our October conversation, Andrew spoke of how he

was getting more playing time than some of the seniors who had played before (he and someone else who had come up with him). So I was getting more plays than the seniors and some of the rookies, so those guys kind of like plotted together and they said whatever they said.

I had a sense that Andrew was beginning to name jealousy as one of the motivating factors behind the other players' story of him.

His Grade 12 had been filled with courses (social, math, science, English, com tech, welding, gym) but, without basketball, he described his experience in the following way:

I just eventually like, I'd keep going, but like time after time I'd miss a class here, 'cause I had the morning, then it was lunch, then I had one class after lunch and the rest of the day was my spare so really I'd go for the morning, then after lunch I wouldn't go to the next class 'cause I thought it was pointless to go for the next class and have a spare so I just stopped going to that class and then after that I'd miss like maybe the first class. I'd sleep in and miss that and then I'd figure I have really two more classes to go to so then I stopped going to that so just time after time I just went and missed one class and keep missing, missing, missing.

As he said,

After awhile I was just like, well like I'd see like people when they were like going to basketball practice 'cause the lockers are like in the same areas so I'm like, just like, it's not really worth it anymore. Why they got to do what they liked

to do when I can't do it because of, like the reasons that it happened, so I just like stopped going.

When he was kicked off the team, "that left me nothing to do in school, 'cause everything else at school was just to play basketball."

As I listened to Andrew tell his stories, I could hear how difficult it must have been to still go to a locker located alongside those of the basketball team but to be there as an outsider, someone who no longer belonged to the team. Losing his membership on the team must have rendered him almost invisible as he would have been excluded from the conversations and privileges that went with being a team member. He would have no longer been seen as who he still saw himself as, that is, as a strong basketball player.

Andrew tells a story of himself as a good student who "knew I could do it if I just put the effort into it." Holding onto the story of himself as a good student is one that helps him feel confident about returning to school.

Stories of Becoming, of Being on the Way Back into School

Andrew does not tell his story as one in which he has dropped out of school but rather as one in which he is going to finish high school and "just going to college and keep doing school and playing basketball." Even with the interruption in his Grade 12 year, Andrew kept planning to somehow finish his Grade 12 and go to a postsecondary institution where he could play basketball. As he said in our first conversation,

I've just been working and then I've just been talking to a bunch of coaches and then actually getting a scholarship to go to a community college to play there if,

well, one of the coaches that I've been talking to, after watching one of their games, he came up to me and asked me if I wanted to play for them, which is this coming year 'cause he saw me in Grade 11 and we talked about my situation and how it went off. So he invited me to practice with them for a day and then after that practice he was, like, well I want you to keep coming in on these certain days. It was 3 days a week. So I kept going to that and then he just asked me if I wanted to play next year and he said he would offer me a scholarship. But then he might be transferring so if he's transferring, I might not get to play but if he is still the coach then I've for sure got that chance.

While he wavered about his choice of what to study, social work was what he seemed most interested in. When I asked him about social work, he said,

Just 'cause my brothers have kids and I usually like to take care of them, when they, one of them owns a restaurant so I take care of his kids a lot, when I'm not working, so I'm usually around kids so might as well just do that for a living.

For Andrew, social work meant working with kids who had trouble in their families. He knew something of this from his mother's practice of taking in foster children over the past three years. His mother had begun this work because as Andrew said,

One of my aunts does it and so she just told my mom 'cause my mom's home in the afternoon, so she's like why don't you do that. So my mom just took a course and then she did it. She's the one who gave me the idea about it [becoming a social worker].

Playing Fair: Living by an Ethical Code as Part of a Team

What it means to be part of a team is part of a deeply lived metaphor for Andrew as he used it to think about how to act. For example, he said, “Well, I said it wasn’t true but I didn’t really like, go deep and defend myself ’cause it’s, they were captains of the team so it was their word against mine.”

Carr’s (1986) words help me to understand something of Andrew’s unfolding life story. Andrew sees himself as in search of narrative coherence, of a plot line that helps him to make sense of his life. When the narrative coherence of his life story was interrupted by his expulsion from the basketball team, Andrew began to search for ways to rebuild that coherence.

As he turned to examine his experiences and to try to rebuild a sense of narrative coherence he drew on his strong feelings about what it means to be part of a larger collective, an extended family or a team. For Andrew, belonging to a team or a family means thinking hard about who he is as a member of the team or family, of being responsible for who he is as part of the team. He did not feel he could judge others but rather could only try to live up to his own code of personal ethics.

As I noted earlier the interruption of Andrew’s narrative coherence caused him to try to restore his life. When I asked Andrew if he was sorry that he was off the team, he said,

I am and I’m not, like I am ’cause it was my last year and it would have like gave me more opportunities on like where I wanted to go, but then I’m not because it

made me look at life in a different way....it made me more responsible and made me look on like how you should treat people and like what to expect and you know like even if you are a team, and like you are close as a team that there might be even a couple of people who will hate on like how good you are and stuff like that.

A Narrative Account of Billie Bob – Claire Desrochers

One diploma exam short of a high school diploma, Billie Bob left to become a mother...

I first saw Billie Bob from a distance as Steve and I waited outside her place of work at an inner-city shelter. Now a high school teacher on sabbatical, Steve came to know Billie Bob when he worked as a teacher's aide at her school; he had offered to join me for this first meeting to introduce us. Steve pointed her out as soon as he noticed her. Billie Bob was walking down the street, alongside a fragile-looking woman. With one arm draped around the woman's shoulder and her head bent towards her in conversation, she guided her through the crosswalk, then paused as they reached the far side to watch the woman walk away. An hour earlier, Billie Bob had called Steve to delay our meeting so she could accompany a client to a medical appointment. I wondered if this was the client in question. As soon as she turned around, Billie Bob spotted Steve, waved excitedly to him and quickly made her way over to where we stood. Out of breath and smiling broadly, she apologized for the delay and confirmed what I had been thinking. With her client now on her way, Billie Bob was now free to join us at the restaurant across the street.

As I think of the vibrant, 22-year-old woman I have come to know through conversations which took place over a 5-month period, I often come back to this image of her at the crosswalk. I think of it as an early glimpse of the care and commitment she brings to her work with some of the neediest people of the inner-city community. I think, too, that the image speaks to the sense of connection Billie Bob feels today to a community she has known and cared for all her life.

Growing Up in the Community

Billie Bob was born in the inner city, or as she put it, “right on the corner of a bad area of town” where she lived with her mother and half-brother until Grade 9. Born of a previous relationship, her brother is 4 years older and is White. Billie Bob describes herself as mixed race, born of their White mother and her West Indian father who came to Canada at the age of 25. Soon after her birth, Billie Bob’s father left the family, remarried, and had two more children. In later years, Billie Bob learned from people in the community that from a number of subsequent relationships, her father had 11 more children who now live in several other cities. Largely absent during her childhood, Billie Bob remembers her father showing up now and then with child support payments and birthday presents. His pattern of occasional visits continues to this day. Through most of her childhood, her mother, Billie Bob remembers, worked two or three jobs simultaneously primarily in daycares and catering. Billie Bob often accompanied her mother to work in the daycare, becoming the helper in the “babies’ room.” As she got older, doing so became more difficult and she spent more time at home alone.

A Sense of Community at School

Billie Bob was delighted when I suggested that we hold our third conversation at the neighbourhood school she had attended. While her time there had ended after Grade 9, she spoke of having attended this school her “whole life.” Her choice of words made me think this had been a very special place for Billie Bob, a place where she had felt a

strong sense of belonging. I couldn't help but notice her enthusiasm and the energy in her step as we entered the recently renovated school. Billie Bob remembers being thrilled to start school.

I was really excited because I had an older brother who had already gone to school. So for me it was like oh! Now I get to see all the fun ...I had known the excitement that was there.

She fondly recalled rising at 5:30 to be ready for a 7:30 start to the school day. "School was fun...there was nothing to do at home...at least there, there's people." As we made our way through the entry, she marked out where she remembered every grade used to line up and wait for the signal to enter the school in the morning. Describing herself as "a good kid" in school who never got into trouble, Billie Bob particularly enjoyed science and math. "I loved science and math. I hated English and social ... I don't know, too much reading and writing...numbers are my fave."

In the main hallway of the school, she pointed out where the science lab had once been; this was where she used to come visit the menagerie of animals, another reason she loved to come to school. Across the hall, there had been a large aquarium full of fish she loved to watch. School seemed indeed to have turned into the exciting place she expected, a place full of discovery.

As we made our way down the hallways past classrooms, Billie Bob took pride in letting teachers and students alike know she was a former student. Peeking into various classrooms she remembered from her time there, she pointed out how different the

student body looked today. There were many more visible minorities represented than in her time.

When we came, there [was] only Asian kids, now there's Black and White...it's mostly immigrants and Blacks...Now it's like everything, which is good...cause me, I was the only Black kid. I'm not fully Black but, I was the only Black kid. Although she did not talk much about it, I sensed that Billie Bob had grown up feeling less accepted than her White sibling.

When I was growing up it was me and my brother and my mom who was White. So my brother used to tell everybody I was adopted, that I wasn't part of the family. I don't know if it was a joke like he tells me today it was a joke, but when I was young, it's different because I looked different, I was a different color so it was easy for me to believe that I wasn't a part of this family. And then we were in touch with his whole family and then there was me, this little coloured kid, so it was odd. I don't know if it bothered me, like I got older, and then I just knew that my father was Black. Did it bother me? I think I would have remembered that but I was so young. Though if he had told me when I was 6 or 7, it might have been different but I was already going to school then. There were lots of kids that were in foster homes, so like Native kids in a White home, or Asian child in a Cambodian home, so there were lots of different nationalities.

Looking around at the diversity represented among the students in the hallway today, Billie Bob felt things were probably easier today for children of difference.

I learned this school had also been a safe place for Billie Bob. On the upper floor, she took me directly to large windows that offered a commanding view of the community in two directions. From there, Billie Bob pointed out where she had lived, where her friends had lived and other landmarks of interest. From this window, Billie Bob and her friends would watch life happen in their community. “We used to always watch here and you can see everything going on ... fights, prostitutes, drug dealers.” I learned too that this window had been a vantage point from which she had planned her walk home every day. “I used to watch how you gonna go home, who’s on the corner.”

The particular corner to which she was referring is where “bad kids” would often pick fights and steal shoes. Billie Bob told me that her brother had been beaten on this corner. Asked whether the teachers knew about the problem corner, Billie Bob shrugged her shoulders and explained there was little teachers could do because these incidents happened after hours and off school property. The upper floor window had provided a way for this resilient elementary school girl to cope with the sometimes scary and dangerous streets of her community as she navigated her way home.

“Sports Made Me Want To Go To School”

A strong plotline in Billie Bob’s story of school was her connection to sports. Although she excelled academically at the junior high level, sports were her passion. She spoke of spending hours and hours before and after school training and competing in soccer, volleyball, and basketball as well as a running program. “I was a real

athlete...Sports made me want to go to school. I played every sport – anything I could get involved in, I would, 'cause there wasn't much else to do.”

Billie Bob was drawn to all sports that were “active,” and the various championship banners she showed me in the school gym were evidence of the success she and her teammates had enjoyed over the years. Billie Bob spent most of her spare time in the gym with her friends, all of whom she described as “pretty much jocks” – thanks to a custodian Billie Bob remembered as an avid basketball player, someone who would quietly bend the rules to allow Billie Bob and her friends access to the gym before and after school, sometimes even joining them to play. For Billie Bob, school was also a place to connect to professional sports events and concerts thanks to the generosity of a local sports team owner who was friends with the principal and who would regularly provide the school with free tickets and transportation to events at a major sport facility located not far away. In addition to providing academic and athletic opportunity, Billie Bob’s elementary junior high school had also served as a contact point for social opportunities she and her friends could otherwise never have afforded.

“I Helped Out at School”

An honours student and star athlete throughout her junior high school years, Billie Bob was also recognized for her leadership skills. Typically chosen as captain of her many sports teams, Billie Bob grew to be recognized as a leader around the school. In Grade 6 with the help of one of the teachers at school, she became involved with an agency that partnered disabled youth with friends. She was trustworthy and teachers often

called on her to help with younger or less able students. By Grade 9, she was giving up her art time to help out in the behavioural class taught by her running coach. Asked why she engaged in this kind of volunteering, Billie Bob responded,

Most of the people we went to school with came from nothing so they knew what it was like to give back...most of us, we helped out...what else was there to do? I guess I made a difference, a lasting impression...I don't know, [I was] like, you know, that cool kid who acknowledged the geek.

She particularly enjoyed working with kids from the behavioural class; these were students who became easily frustrated because of their low attention span. Ever since she could remember, Billie Bob recounted, these were kids who got picked on, something she felt "wasn't nice." Billie Bob's commitment to and support of these students garnered her numerous leadership awards throughout junior high, including a scholarship valued at \$2,000.¹⁰ During our walk through the school, Billie Bob was unable to locate the plaques on which her leadership accomplishments were recognized. They had once lined the main hall, but since the renovation they were nowhere to be found.

"Teachers Who Have Known Me All My Life"

In this small school setting, many of Billie Bob's teachers doubled as coaches, and she got to know them very well. Her closeness to them was confirmed when we ran

¹⁰ Billie Bob was never able to collect this scholarship, as the benefactor's fortunes changed and he left the city.

into one of her former teachers in the hallway that day. Billie Bob almost squealed with delight as she introduced me to her former running coach, Miss Gazelle. As I listened to them reminisce and inquire about each other's lives, I could begin to see the depth of relationships Billie Bob had forged with her teachers during her 10 years at this school. "I had teachers who had known me for 10 years ... my math teacher taught my brother when he was in kindergarten...so my Grade 9 math teacher had known me my whole entire life."

I found it particularly telling that, as we worked our way through the gallery of class photos, Billie Bob pointed teachers out to me (identifying each of them, save one, by name) before her classmates. The classes, I noticed, were small; by Billie Bob's count, never more than 15 or 18 students per class. The close connections she enjoyed with her teachers and coaches would serve her well as she moved into her last year of junior high.

In Grade 9, a dispute with their landlord over mice forced Billie Bob and her mother to leave their home and move to a different area of the city. It was a long bus ride from this new home to the school, and Billie Bob hated waiting for the bus, particularly in winter when she had to travel to and from sports practice in the dark. She began to skip and eventually "just stopped coming one day." Her absences were quickly noticed and Billie Bob remembers how persistent teachers were in their efforts to contact her mother.

My mom was working all the time...she was gone and she couldn't see. What [the school] would do is, not like high school, not leave a message, like they wouldn't give up until they got a hold of her, and then like, 'cause the school's so small, I would come into the school my teacher would be like: "What's wrong?"

What happened? Something's wrong. I know you. What's wrong with you?" It was really hard to fool them. They talked to everybody. Everybody knew everybody, we'd all been there so long that if we skipped...they'd call your parents...they would be like right there, right in your face to understand your absence.

Even the principal got involved in figuring out how to reconnect Billie Bob with school.

He'd call my house then I would answer the phone. He's like, "How come you're not in school?" I'm like, "'cause I can't get to school. I can't get there it's too cold." And he used to live in the west end so he used to drive the road by my house and pick me up.

For the next 3 months of winter, the principal and Billie Bob travelled to and from school together and her teachers collaborated on an attendance plan to make sure she stayed in school. Then, once winter had passed, "school became ok again."

Billie Bob's Stories to Live By Interrupted

"I liked junior high – I just didn't like high school...I went to a different school every semester"

Intent on staying connected to one of her junior high teachers and coaches, Billie Bob registered for Grade 10 at a large high school where he had been hired to begin teaching the following year. Billie Bob's plans were thwarted before the start of the school year when her mother was transferred to a new job in a city 3 hours away. I

couldn't help but think what a shock it must have been for her to move from the intimacy of her neighbourhood school to a high school of 3,500 students in a new city. Billie Bob did not have good memories of her first semester of Grade 10. "I didn't make very many friends, started doing very bad in school."

Her stay in this school would be short lived. In the second semester, school authorities forced her to relocate to another school when they discovered the house she and her mother had moved to was located outside the first school's catchment area. She referred to this new school as "the far school," which she would have to reach by bus. Billie Bob had faced a similar problem in Grade 9, only this time, the frequent skipping that resulted was not addressed as before. Billie Bob rarely attended classes, but unlike the friends with whom she skipped, she remained committed to completing assignments. One teacher noticed and rewarded her efforts.

There was one teacher...she was really nice; she was the one who actually, I should have failed because I missed almost every one of her classes; I would only go to class once a week, but I aced all my assignments so she couldn't really fail me, but attendance-wise I failed so my mark was like 67, but attendance, I got a zero. So all my marks were based on just my assignments, which was good for me...she couldn't fail me 'cause like the other kids would skip and wouldn't do the work...even if I wasn't there...she would still get my assignment...I always did the work, I just wasn't there.

At the end of summer following her Grade 10 year, Billie Bob and her mother moved back to her home city and she transferred to a third high school setting in as many

semesters. “Mom wanted to move back to the city ... I was mad at my mom and I hated the world, just hated everybody because I had to make all new friends over in high school again.”

I could not begin to imagine the academic and social hardships Billie Bob would have had to deal with in moving to a third high school setting in as many semesters, Having missed the deadline for high school registration, she began Grade 11 at an outreach school behind her home in the downtown area. Billie Bob particularly enjoyed this learning environment because she could complete assignments without the expectation that she spend much time in class. Working part-time to support herself had always been part of Billie Bob’s life and the outreach program delivery allowed her to combine work and schooling in a way that suited her.

That ... worked for me, not being in school but doing my work, so I excelled a lot, because I worked full time and went to school two hours a day. I passed all my courses and got the most credits ever in one semester.

At the end of this very successful semester, Billie Bob had a falling out with her mother and moved back to the other city to live with a girlfriend. Transferring back to the second high school she had attended there, Billie Bob completed Grade 11 in what would be her fourth high school setting in as many semesters. When her girlfriend moved unexpectedly to another city at the end of this school year, Billie Bob came home for her final year of high school. Her mother had since moved to the suburbs where Billie Bob registered at a large high school. She found friends there whom she had met through sports but shared no classes with them as they were a year behind her. Skipping classes

provided opportunities to connect with them and spend time at a large mall nearby which Billie Bob remembers was a constant distraction; she and her friends began to engage in shoplifting as a way to “get an adrenaline rush.” She was eventually caught, charged, fined, and left with a criminal record that made it difficult for her to find a job until she managed, several years later, to buy a pardon.

While in her last year of high school, Billie Bob moved in with her boyfriend, the man who became her common law husband. At 24 (7 years older than she was), he was already working as an engineer and had a preschool aged daughter from a prior relationship. The night before her final diploma exam (English), Billie Bob was admitted to hospital in severe pain with a suspected gallbladder problem. The following morning, as her classmates sat down to write their diploma exam, Billie Bob learned she was pregnant. Six months later when she might have attempted the exam again, she recalled being “about ready to pop” with the baby at that time, and diploma exams were the last thing on her mind. And so, only one diploma exam short of her high school diploma, Billie Bob left high school behind to become a mother.

A Family Story of Education

Billie Bob’s daughter, Danielle, now 3 years of age, has been very much part of our conversations. Each time we met, Billie Bob would pull out her cell phone to show me a photograph of a child I found strikingly beautiful and whose heritage, Billie Bob

described as *Dogla*, part Black and part *Coolie*.¹¹ By contrast, Danielle's half-sister, now 7, was part Coolie and part White. Looking at photos of the two girls side by side, I found it interesting that Billie Bob's daughter was growing up with an older, lighter skinned half-sibling, just as she had. I wondered whether Danielle's mixed heritage was an issue in her father's family. Billie Bob explained that while her father-in-law would have preferred a Coolie daughter-in-law, Danielle's position as first born grandchild trumped all such concerns.

The importance of school surfaced in our conversations around Danielle's future and brought to light what I understand to be a strong family story around the value of education. Looking back over her experience of school, Billie Bob insists education had always mattered to her. "I always cared – just didn't like having that person nag... I liked you to give me my work."

In her culture, Billie Bob explained, education is very important. Despite being largely absent from her life, Billie Bob's father has always supported her education. To this day, she believes he is still mad at her for not finishing her high school. He has paid her tuition through two college programs, and she knows she could count on him to support any further studies she might undertake. I see this plotline passed down through the generations as Billie Bob told me her plans for Danielle's education. Finding her

¹¹ "Coolie" is the term Billie Bob used to describe Danielle's father and refers to a brown person of Indian descent from the Caribbean. According to Billie Bob, although it is considered a pejorative term in South Africa, it is widely used and accepted in the Caribbean.

daughter particularly bright, she plans to have her start school early and has already obtained special permission from the board for her to do so.

Why waste the year in daycare when they could be learning something, right?

And like, I had to friggin' talk to the school board, I was so frustrated, 'cause she was born on March 7, and the cut off was March 1st and I was like, 'You're gonna make my daughter wait, be a year behind, for 6 days? That's not fair. And two of those days are on the weekend.'" So they're going to allow her to go, she'll be able to start when she's 4.

In an ideal world, Billie Bob would have her daughter attend a uniform school.

Asked why, she responded,

I don't think school is about fashion, like, at all. Or who got the Nike shoes, and who's got the track suit...there are children whose parents just can't afford it, so those kids are picked on and it's not fair. And where we're from [in the Caribbean], everybody wears a uniform, everybody looks the same, everybody is the same, the only thing that separates you is your brains...I think that's important because at school there's too much like, you won't have nobody stealin' nobody's shoes, or stealing nobody's new jackets, 'cause everybody's the same. I always thought that was important...It's not about dressing up, if you want to dress up, go to a party.

At this point in time, Billie Bob would like to obtain her high school diploma to set an example for her daughter. Given the time gone by, this would mean retaking her final high school English course, an onerous task for any single parent working full-time,

let alone one who “hates to read.” Her current life circumstances make this unlikely to happen. Now a single mother in the process of divorcing Danielle’s father, Billie Bob is also responsible for her own mother, who shares her house and helps care for her daughter. Furthermore, Billie Bob sees little practical value in pursuing that option given that she has managed to complete two college programs without her high school diploma. On the basis of a college entrance exam, Billie Bob was first accepted into college to complete training as a health care aid. (She had always dreamed of becoming a nurse; becoming a health care aide worker was an attainable alternative under the circumstances.) When she realized this work did not suit her, she returned to college to train as a medical office assistant and landed a part-time job working in a dermatology clinic. In order to spend more time with her daughter by day, Billie Bob took on a night shift at an inner-city agency, later switching to full-time, day-shift employment as an outreach worker at an inner-city agency.

Reconnecting With Her Community ... and Making a Difference

Today, as an intake worker for an addictions program in a homeless shelter, Billie Bob works with some of the most vulnerable people in society. Her clients are women with mental health issues who need help from the basics of personal hygiene to support to get to medical and court appointments. I hear compassion in her voice as she tells me of trying to stop a client from trying to chase away voices by beating her head against a wall and of trying to prevent suicidal women from jumping out into traffic as she accompanies them to appointments. Her face lights up as when she speaks of activities she has planned

for the crafts group she runs as part of the recovery program. As we sit together in the restaurant across the street from her place of work, a siren sounds, prompting Billie Bob to run to the window. It is clear to me that she worries about her ladies, that they matter to her. “I care about them, if I don’t who else will? ... a lot of people turn their face...I grew up here so I’ve seen this for so long ... I know the issues and I can do good here.”

When I ask Billie Bob why she connects so well with her clients, she tells me it’s because she treats them like people. One of the necessities of her work, she believes, is to smile and treat clients like people, not frown and look them up and down, especially clients with no self-esteem wondering if they’re ever going to get clean. Billie Bob explained that she treats them not as clients, but as friends...she cares for them. And it seems they care for her; some walk 10 blocks, she tells me, for a hug in the morning. She works with them because she wants to be here. “Clients just want somebody not to judge them, to be honest with them, but work with them about how we are going to get their life back together.”

Billie Bob’s commitment to her clients is evident in her choice of pronoun as she talks about how ‘we’ are going to get their life back together. Billie Bob worries that clients get very different approaches from some of her colleagues. Not everyone “gets it,” she tells me, and Billie Bob finds their lack of understanding challenging. She is dismissive of people who are superficial or afraid of homeless people.

I treat them like people. I smile at them, hug them. [The clients tell me] you make us laugh, you listen. My managers are the kind of people who show up with their notepad to see Billy and write down something about Billy but they would never

remember anything about him. And then there are managers who are like, “Do you know how many clients I have?” But me, faces, memory and info go really good so I’m like, “Oh, what happened? How is your son? What happened with your son’s court?” They’re like, “You remembered!” I try to remember things about their life. People need to go to AADAC. I will help them, I will hold their hand, I will visit them, I will never find them a place and leave them because then they fail, they’ll fall through the cracks and end back into the shelter... Helping one to the fullest is better than helping 10. Some other people I work with don’t get that.

As she speaks of her work, I am deeply impressed by Billie Bob’s humanity, her compassion, positive outlook, determination, and sense of responsibility. I find it hard to imagine how such a young woman with so much on her personal plate continues to bring such energy to her work on a daily basis. Most people would find it overwhelming to work with such a high needs clientele in this area of the city. When I ask how she sustains her energy and commitment, Billie Bob explains it’s her connection to the women that keeps her coming back.

That’s what keeps me coming back. Those ladies still remember me. My reward is to see one of my clients be like, I wanna go into your recovery program...I’m ready to give up getting high, prostitution, the money. I’m ready to let the Lord do his work; I’m getting my life back. And that’s why I come back, ’cause all it takes is one lady that will make me wanna come back...I work with women who are, you now, the worst of the worst...the most passed out...the biggest prostitutes,

HIV, tuberculosis, Hep C, they got it all, they got nothing going for them, and then it's like they care. Life means something now, you know? And to let somebody see that life is meaningful, life isn't all about getting high and partying. Yeah, 'cause like my thing is I can't change the world but I can change one person at a time.

Billie Bob tells me she finds her work rewarding because it provides a way for her to give back. Hearing her use the expression "giving back" reminds me that she used a similar phrase when referring to her volunteer work in the behavioural class at her junior high school. Interestingly, Billie Bob told me recently that one of her newest clients in the shelter is a former student of the behavioural class; at the intake interview for the shelter, the woman recognized Billie Bob as the girl who helped her in class. I thought of how she was continuing to help her out at this stage of her life.

Has Billie Bob come full circle, I wonder? Found her way back to a place of comfort and purpose? Happy working as a mental health worker in the inner city, I think of her as having found a rewarding way to reconnect to a community she has known all her life, a place where she "knows everyone by name."

Looking Ahead

While Billie Bob shared very definite ideas about how she thinks the shelter should be run, she has no aspirations to take on more responsibility at her work. Management, she insists, is not for her. When asked where she imagines herself in five

years, Billie Bob responded without hesitation that she would still be working as an outreach worker because it is where she feels she can best contribute.

I love what I do. I would like to retire from here...for me the biggest thing is helping people... I could work plastic surgery where I used to and all I'm doing is helping somebody look pretty ...or I can come here and make a difference in somebody's life. I'm making somebody want to live.

What does the future hold, I wonder, for this early school leaver? Perhaps further training in the mental health field to learn how to help these people to the best of her ability, or perhaps even further education to become an addictions counsellor, she tells me. And while she imagines her father's offer of tuition still stands, Billie Bob now has living expenses for her family to think about...and she has a plan. In a little over a year, she will have accumulated enough years of service at the shelter to apply for a scholarship.

A Narrative Account of Kevlar – Pam Steeves

Fortune Cookie

Awash at Sea...

Wandering past closing store fronts inside the downtown mall on Thursday evening in late September, I arrived at the escalator down to the deserted food court below. Empty chairs and tables filled the vast open basement floor, but where was Kevlar? My eyes scanned up and down the vacant space to get a first glimpse of my participant for the early school leavers' study. My heart was pounding a little, perhaps he would not be there, but then I saw him at the credit card kiosk where he had stood since mid-afternoon that day, trying to make sales. I was delighted to meet him, a nice young man. We chit chatted for a minute. He was bored and hungry, he said. Then I waited a short distance away until his official job time ended. Kevlar thought he should stick it out even though I realized there was no one around to check on him.

I planned on inviting Kevlar to a nearby hotel restaurant, which I had scouted out earlier as being quiet and private enough for a meal and conversation with a tape recorder running. Kevlar was personable and talkative. He wanted to be part of the study. He noticed it on an Internet website he came across and he made contact by email. Kevlar thought we would be interested in his story of leaving school early because it might be quite different than most. For him it wasn't about school but about his "screwed up" upbringing.

While waiting for menus, we engaged in lively conversation about politics and the upcoming U. S. election. Kevlar struck me as very bright and savvy for his 18 years. The

menu was a disappointment ... for Kevlar. He wondered if we could go to a restaurant just across from us that might have “real food.” I began to think about restaurant food in a brand new way. Fancy hotel pasta and seafood dishes are light, probably just right for business people traveling and arriving late evening for a bite to eat. The food isn’t hearty enough if you are actually really hungry. The other restaurant offered shepherd’s pie, a big enough portion.

In preparation for the taped conversation, I handed Kevlar a blank piece of paper and pen whereby he could create a kind of annal or time line of events over his life reflecting the story of his early school leaving and beyond. Points on the annal might trigger stories he’d like to talk about. I told him he could create the annal in any way he liked.

He began at the beginning ... his life story as he composed it, drawing and doodling events over time as he talked. Drawing the annal while telling me the stories gave Kevlar a sense of authority over his soon-to-unfold haphazard life. I noticed that events around significant “troubles and confusions” led to a great deal of intense picturing.

For this narrative account I chose to create word images of Kevlar’s early school leaving story interwoven within life stories. The word images are drawn from Kevlar’s actual words in the transcripts, filled with emotion, hope, and tension that speak to who he is and is becoming.

Apart

And the day I was born my dad and my grandma came to the hospital

They actually took me from my mom.

He didn't believe I was going to be safe with her

And then long story short I, I met her when I was 13

But that's later down the road.

Living in Rivenmore Grade 1 or something...

My dad , the trailer company, he was working on top of it

A really hot day and he actually fell – passed out

From heat exhaustion and,

So that's like permanent, constant pain

I would go every weekend up North

To visit my grandma and then about Grade 3

I ended up just staying with her for a year

Cause my dad's back got really bad.

Aspen Road School. It was fine

And I had this teacher named Miss Fensminster

If you did something good you got this little mark,

And like if you collect a certain amount

You gotstuff or whatever.

It worked really cool.

And um then in Grade 4 I moved to Easton

Have you been to Easton at all?

Kevlar wanted to know if I knew where in the city the community of Easton was located. I knew it could be described as a rough and tough neighbourhood. I recalled a city school district considering some schools in the area as “inner city” even though they were located on the outskirts of the city. The tone of my reply seemed to give Kevlar the signal he was looking for and he continued his story.

Well in this place, it’s called the Plainview Motel,

My dad basically thought that since he had a small kid

And couldn’t really clean and do anything,

That living in a motel that had maids would be a good idea.

I went to Easton for Elementary

It was really difficult going to school

I couldn’t really tell anyone where I lived

I’d come home and play on the computer

Yeah. I grew up on the computer

I didn’t really fit into anything

Like fit in with the popular kids or anything

But that's school

The perfect situation

Grade 7, That's St Pauls I think

The most unpopular kid in school

Completely alone, definitely embarrassing

Cause in schools

There's always the people

Who have the perfect lives, the perfect parents

And they rocket directly to the top

They're practically favoured by all the teachers

Because they get the best grades,

Because they're not even stressed at all

School is built for them

And it just doesn't work out well for anyone that's not in a perfect situation

But for Grade 7

I learned how to play the saxophone and stuff

It was quite awesome

I loved the saxophone

And then Grade 8 at Walton

An email from my mom

Found me through my uncle

Military records – googling my last name

And she would come over sometimes

And I got to see my brother and sister.

Yeah it was really awesome.

I talk to my sister all the time now.

We're so close.

I started despising the way my life was here,

And how I basically hated it.

She brought up the idea of moving back in with her

She was engaged to a man who had a good amount of money

Apparently they really had a good life

And my dad agreed

Because we all thought it would be a really good situation

Finally I thought, Kevlar's fortunes seemed to be changing for the better. How amazing it must have been for Kevlar to see his brother and sister and mother for the first

time. What perhaps I take for granted ... an actual semblance of family was coming together for Kevlar.

Fraying at the seams

Two days after I moved in with her

She ditched him,

Will was swearing around Cindy (his sister)

A great guy otherwise

Probably the greatest guy I know.

He's helped me so much in the past few years

She took us to a women's shelter in Morgan

And then a different one in Shaftsbury (outskirts of Rivenmore)

And eventually I found a really neat little house

The exact one that was perfect

I remember how Kevlar described finding that perfect house. He said it was "really weird actually." He had been looking for a rental property for a really long time and then just as he was about to give up, he sneezed and his eyes fell on this "exact" one that he described as perfect. Kevlar then told me that a lot of things in his life worked like that.

I went to school in Shaftsbury Plains

Grade 8 was pretty much finished

I missed a good chunk of it

Like half of it

Then my mom decided to move us again to Rivenmore

No idea why

A little place near Rivenmore Mall

Another junior high school, Valleycrest

It was a really cool school

Shaped in a circle

I don't remember teachers but I remember doing home ec class.

Cooking – it was really fun – I still cook,

Especially now that I'm getting my own place

And a good little group of friends

I met hanging out during breaks and stuff like that

Not a bunch of rich kids

Yeah

But we were room mating with my mom's friend

He had a really bad gambling problem

She had to find a place she could afford herself

So we moved to Ash Rd

I finished Grade 9 at Valleycrest

I just barely passed

They can't actually fail you in Grade 9

Despite this downturn and turmoil, I imagined Kevlar as getting a break, a second chance. Whatever gaps in his schooling Kevlar was enduring as he moved from place to place and school to school, he would not have to fail Grade 9. I wondered how he knew about this policy and what part the school system plays in providing second chances? Or was this simply a serendipitous occurrence, one that can be taken advantage of when perfect situations are few and far between?

Summer after Grade 9 – A life in pieces

And then it happened again

We were living in the apartments

Me and my Mom had an altercation one day

My freezy melted on her table

Her tiny little octagon table by her bedside

One little corner was peeling

Oh, no

She went crazy – I don't know why

Like she had pent up rage or something

She walked into my room just kicking my computer and smashing it

Saying how would you feel if I broke your stuff

She f...ing grabs me and threw me on the bed,

Sorry for swearing, but she grabs me.

She thought I was going to throw her TV out the window

Makes no sense

She starts chasing me, so I go out to the end of the hall

She closes the door and locks it.

I walked outside and tried to yell to her from the window

I'm not even wearing shoes

No shoes, no socks, nothing

Then Kevlar stopped for a minute in the midst of this outpouring to look down at the audio recorder and to ask if it was still turned on. The recorder was digital so no moving tape was visible. I assured him the recorder was working and he said O.K. and went on with the events of the story. He wanted me to hear it.

I finally coerced her to bring me my shoes

She walks into this bus stop and sits me down

She throws two or three bucks on the ground and tells me
You better get used to getting money this way
Cause this is the way you're going to get it from now on
And well, I don't even get what that means
Because why are people going to throw money on the ground – right?
It was just ridiculous.

And from there I walked,
To Rivenmore Mall
The only place I knew,
Knew anyone would be

Seeing my friend Kenzie
Went back to her house
Her mom called social services
I gave them my Mom's phone number so they could talk to her
She told them she would let me back in

But she told me to f...off.
She doesn't let me back in.

Throughout his telling, I noted Kevlar often shifted to the present tense. He became very animated and detailed in his drawing and scribbles portraying the graphic account of these events on his annal. The intensity of Kevlar's telling made me wonder how many people have ever heard his story. Was this a second chance for Kevlar...to be heard? Yet I was shaken as Kevlar continued – was this a story just too hard to tell?

Forsaken

I went to a group home. It was O.K.

But I was practically traumatized

There's a probationary period

For the first two weeks there are chores

You have to follow all the rules and stuff

And if you don't you are out

But I was like a 14 year old kid that just went through all this

So I ended up just a-wol ing from it

To try and go see my friends

And it created a kind of chain

Of going from group home to group home.

I ended up in a parented home that I actually liked

A Pre SIL (Supported Independent Living)

But I never got that far 'cause

'Cause I don't know..

I just was in a really bad time I guess

I would leave on the weekend

And get back a day late

Social services is so packed with people.

There was a time

If you were even a minute late

Your bed was closed and they put someone else in it.

During this time I started Grade 10 at George Wood

And I kept trying to do it as much as I could

Living in random places

But it's really hard to do school when you don't live anywhere.

I could do the school...

Its just like after school.

I would have to do my homework

Figure out where I'm going to stay

Figure out if I'm going to make it through the day

A lot of the time I ended up just going to the mall

Staying all night

Cause it's open

24 hours

And so some nights I would have been awake all night

And going to school

And practically passing out

And it just stopped working

I ended up completely going the homeless route

Chilling and hanging out at Rivenmore Mall

With other people in roughly the same situation

I got stuck in that

There were random times that I would see my sister and brother

But I wouldn't even want them to see me

Cause of the stuff that was going on

Kevlar often used the word "random." It makes me think of serendipity and chance. Luck is random. Being "down on your luck" at certain times leaves a space to be lucky at other times. It might be viewed as a stroke of luck that Kevlar had been able to connect with his sister and brother in the first place, through his Mom browsing military records. Listening to Kevlar I realized I was needing and inventing a way to see hope in his story.

Resilience

And then Grade 11 , George Wood

Just giving up – going to a group home

Accepting what it was

I just decided to change things

Cause I was going to die if I didn't

And then things started picking up.

I was doing better in school – a really good group of friends

And then from there I moved back with my mom

Back to Shaftsbury

Around mid Grade 11 before the second semester

My mom got back together with her boyfriend and a nice big house.

And it was “you're back,” “you're back,” “la la la,” open arms.

And this is something that's still between us to this day

She thinks that I ran away

It's not running away

It's almost like nothing happened

Everything just kind of went back to normal I guess

As normal as it could get.

Never actually brought up what happened in that entire period.

Went to Lansdowne High School

Finished Grade 11.

Grade 11 was probably the greatest year of my school

Both schools – the friends.

Kevlar could see from my reaction that I was thinking that things were getting better. Grade 11 at George Wood High School in Rivenmore and Lansdowne High in Shaftsbury were his greatest school experiences. A kind of sigh of relief must have shown in my body language. But then I heard the words “But it gets worse.”

Summer after Grade 11 – Abandonment

Right before I turned 17, the summer

We all have different Dads

And one day a phone call

Saying you have a daughter, 14. Here she is. She’s on her way.

My mom took her in when she could barely support us all

The sisters started fighting

Created a really giant rift in my family.

My mom couldn't take it. She kicked Mia out

She wanted to move to Rendall –to her new love in Rendall

Me and my sister and brother thought it was a stupid idea.

There was no way we were going

And the moment I brought up the word abandonment

The gloves were off

She dropped off my brother at his Dad's

My sister got kicked out because she was defending our viewpoint .

And she dropped me off at the fair grounds

Where I was working at a booth with a website

My 17th birthday.

I didn't see her again for over a year.

She just left.

My sister and I returned

To the basement [the nice big house]

In Shaftsbury

Jenny (a friend) and some roommates

We let them in

But it went sour

Cindy (his sister) ended up leaving.

And then I left and eventually Jenny left.

And this was in Grade 12, at Lansdowne

The best school I've had

Yeah, I learned German both years.

Lansdowne's an amazing school

'Cause it's in Shaftsbury

Everything is

The people are a lot cleaner.

They're from a higher grade

Like they're just more upscale I guess

And there's just not all the bullshit ghetto drama

Like the city has.

Three quarters through the first semester of Grade 12

I just couldn't handle my room mates anymore.

Basically our roommates had already graduated

They're already finished school

So every single day they'd party to 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning

I ended up moving out of there

And I left school

And ...It really sucked

'Cause that was probably my favourite school

And in Alberta it's almost impossible for a kid to get a 4th year at a public school

So I just had to stop school .

I had registered

I tried going to T M Rogers

To do another year of Grade 12.

They wouldn't let me.

I tried going to a lot of schools in Rivenmore

I just couldn't do it.

But I am actually registering for virtual school.

It's really awesome

Kevlar told me he would need \$70 for registration for the online courses. I

wondered how difficult it would be to get the money. Maybe someone would help him

out with this if necessary. Maybe there are student loans. Maybe this would work. I was beginning to enter Kevlar's world.

After I moved out

I went back to Kenzie's (his friend) house

Her Mom let me stay

Eventually I moved to Murray Road

To Walton, it's just like a community.

A three-storey apartment.

Everyone in the whole building ended up meeting everyone else

It was cool. It was really fun. It was like a frat or something

After Walton I finally got in contact with my Mom.

I stayed with her a month to save money for a place

A little house with Kenzie

Across from the fair grounds

And also my cousin and Jarret from Walton

This past summer

2 months ago

Fortune Cookie

I listened hard as Kevlar told this story, traveling with him to a world so different from my own when I grew up. Kevlar's story took centre stage. There were nods and a few checks for clarification but I did not want to slow the momentum, the words igniting as he moved the pen across the paper. But now I felt I was coming to a place where I could ask Kevlar questions and where Kevlar might reflect on things past and tell me more of his hopes and dreams for the future.

To begin with, I was startled wide awake to realize Kevlar had been able to stay in school so long, making it to mid-way through Grade 12. He told me, "It sucked changing so much but my mind's built that way now I guess." He added "I've always known that education is the key to life and I think it's ridiculous to not get it." He is planning to redo math and physics, taking Math 20 and 30 because they are pure and because he loves quantum physics. In fact on his own he feels he has learned more from researching on the Internet than his entire education, "cause it's practical knowledge. It's not like trigonometry. Like honestly I think the only thing I've used from school that I've learned is multiplying and adding."

Kevlar showed me his I-phone. He enthusiastically explained to me that he can answer any question, get any phone number and "find out anything about anything in the entire world." He showed me how he could find out where to order from and find the nearest pizza outlet. I thought about how significant an I-phone would be if you were on your own – the sense of connection it might give you. He told me it was costly but well worth it and was purchased during the time of his credit card kiosk job.

He also talked to me about libraries, and how he had always used them. He loves the computer access but also the reading. He has four library cards, and although he can't take out any materials because of fines he is able to use the computers there. He also recalled the library at Lansdowne High School and was impressed with how much money they had recently spent in replacing computers and electronic equipment there. He loved the computer and media classes while he attended. It was interesting for me as a former teacher-librarian that when I asked him if anybody in the schools ever tried to figure out what was going on with his haphazard life he recalled that it was a librarian who would talk to him. "They're more human." Certainly I remember conversations with a few children who seemed to think of the library as a kind of escape. The possibilities to attend to children's interests were always high, whether choosing a book to read, choosing a research topic or just hanging out after class.

Kevlar shared with me that because his life had 'ended up' the way it did he had learned a lot of life skills. He has the ability to move around and be fine. He said he's met so many people and had to "accept them as who's going to be around me." He feels this has made it easy for him to talk to people he doesn't know. He wondered aloud if it would help him in the future with his plans to go into media and broadcasting. I was taken aback with what he said next. I had never really given enough thought to the idea that it might be better not to have any influence of your parents. Yet I know of situations and circumstances that parents could be in that would be untenable for a young and growing child...

I have chosen to capture Kevlar's words in a found poem portrayed here.

To be honest

I really am actually so grateful for the way that I grew up

Most people end up just being the clone of the parents

That brought them up.

The sum of what their two parents are.

Whereas I grew up without any

Almost any

Influence besides my own.

So I could actually grow up and be myself.

Not many people get that opportunity.

To be honest

Kevlar's words prompted further questioning at a later date to ask him about resilience. He agreed that he did seem to bounce back and that if something didn't work out he "would make something else work." But he also told me that "the bouncing" was tiring and he was getting sick of it. I responded that I thought he was very young for living through all of this. He later told me that sometimes he'd just like to hop on a plane and disappear. I wondered whether there were people he could name that have helped, supported or encouraged him. Kevlar told me there was "sparsely" Will, but no one else. He told me he wasn't in contact with his Dad and his Mom didn't have the money. Will (whom Kevlar described as being awesome and having helped him so much recently) was formerly married to his Mom and was very involved with bringing up his sister

Cindy. Will supports Kevlar's plans to finish high school courses online and go on to post secondary. Kevlar sees Will fairly regularly when he visits with his sister. When I asked Kevlar about support from friends he told me they were there but "friends can only go so far...because they're not in the same situation." Counsellors and staff at his various high schools did not seem to have an impact. Kevlar's understanding from school people was that "in Alberta it's almost impossible for a kid to get a fourth year at a public high school."

Since the summer of 2008 Kevlar has explored options for finishing his education online. He only needs to come up with the \$70 to register. In September, with his credit card kiosk job and a magazine project job slated to start in October, he figured he would have the money to pay for his place and living expenses and save for future education. In the meantime he excitedly told me about the magazine project which came up when he was living on Murray Road. It was a federally funded program to enable "like groups of people to come together that are having trouble staying in their jobs because they're not built for that kind of thing." So people "having trouble in their lives" can get a "booster shot" by learning how to write a magazine article, do layout, graphic design and photography to create a magazine for distribution in the city. The magazine would give exposure to aspiring clothing designers and other arts based entrepreneurs. Kevlar was thinking of doing something on a number of DJ's he knew in town. Afterwards Kevlar said the project tries to fund you and lead you on the right track for where you want to go. Kevlar had a copy of the latest magazine with him, he showed me some of the layouts.

He wanted to give me the copy but I told him to save it. He could bring me one next time if he would like .

Later in the fall when I spoke to Kevlar again he told me the magazine project had ended; the funding pulled. He had to move again by the end of the month. He was staying with friends for now. Kevlar also had changed jobs. He no longer worked at the downtown mall at the credit card booth but at a music venue on Murray Road that had a bar. He planned to get a bachelor place near his work so that it wouldn't be far to walk home at 3:00 in the morning. Kevlar likes music and the money is good with tips.

But it was talk of the design college he hoped to get into some day that lifted his spirits. He wondered if I had heard of it, Sagen College of Design Arts, a teaching college for drawing, photography, cinematics, animation and the science behind graphic design. He told me the day before he had decided to walk in there while he was downtown and "check it out." He struck up a conversation with the marketing director who told Kevlar the history of the college, and he in turn showed her "a lot of stuff I'd been making lately" and how long he had been using technology. The dean of admissions got involved and told Kevlar he could be accepted as a mature student in January if he was able to pass the admissions test, but would give him a chance to take the test first so he could find out what he needed to learn. Kevlar was thrilled to think he could be going to college "on time." He asked about the online courses with Alberta Education. But the dean suggested that the design course was an intensive 6 months and he'd be too busy. Kevlar mentioned the expensive tuition but said that he thought BGS could fund him up to \$10,000. Once he is finished with the program he told me the people at the school would help him look

for a job in the industry. He knows there are opportunities in Rivenmore especially in the arts, but there are also many hard memories for him here. Kevlar imagines himself going to Vancouver or Toronto. Or maybe just getting a car and driving out to California to see what he could do.

I turned the tape off. Our second dinner conversation was ending. This time we were at a restaurant on Murray Road, one of Kevlar's choosing. There was lots of music, friendly staff and delicious "real" food in big portions! He thanked me. We began talking again about the U.S. election. Kevlar was well informed and also pleased about the outcome. On my first meeting with Kevlar he showed me his tattoo – a lotus flower. I told him a story of the lotus flower of hope in Vietnamese culture – that no matter how long it took or how muddy the soil, the dormant seed will eventually bloom in beauty. Kevlar's stories are hard to hear and imagine. I feel very inadequate. I can only offer my hope that things will come together. It is the end of the meal and the waiter has handed each of us a fortune cookie.

Afterward

I had mixed feelings as I prepared to meet Kevlar for the third and official final conversation for the study. I would be presenting Kevlar with my narrative account of his story of leaving school and he would be invited to make changes to suit him. I was a little nervous of what he might say but also it was hard to think I would not be meeting him again. I had been drawn in by his sincerity and good will and I was moved by the stories he told.

It was early evening but getting dark and cold as I raced past storefronts and eateries looking up at signs for the restaurant of Kevlar's choosing while all the while looking down at my ticking watch. I couldn't find the place and it was getting later. A few blocks further down the road I bumped into Kevlar going the other way. I was grateful to see him. I had walked right past the restaurant. It wasn't a place I was expecting, based on our last few meetings; this one was more upscale. Kevlar seemed more at ease to see me this time. As well, his clothes seemed to indicate a cooler sophistication, black jacket with collar up. I began by ordering coffee and water as I usually did and this time Kevlar did the same.

At this visit I found out Kevlar was working at an Internet café. He told me about his boss whom he admired as someone who wanted to expand his service to companies in town to provide free Internet access throughout the city. I imagined Kevlar at this place, being personable, assisting people with their computers, selling snacks and pop behind the counter.

I wedged the narrative account among the cutlery, linen serviettes, water goblets and coffee cups on the high café table we were sitting at. I planned to go through the account page by page with Kevlar. We both had pens to change things. As we began he told me it was good to see his story of leaving school on paper, "reflecting on it with someone is different than reflecting on it yourself." He felt it gave him perspective, underlining for him a more objective way of looking at the events of his life. He liked the way he could see "tiny little moments that changed the rest of my life." He appreciated

the titles I gave to portions of his account and suggested, “Maybe we should title this (the whole piece) Fortune Cookie.” He talked about the stories as “something out of a movie.”

Reading through the account he paused to wonder what the week was like for his sister and little brother after he had been kicked out. He wondered how his grandma would describe her taking him away at the hospital when he was born – that she might see the whole thing differently. He wondered if his mom would ever realize what had happened. He also said that lately although some things had gone well “I’m almost waiting for everything to fall apart again.”

Kevlar felt his plans for Sagen College of Design Arts were going ahead. He had the funding in place through BGM (related to the magazine project Kevlar had been involved with in the fall but whose funding had collapsed.) He plans now to take the entrance test in July so that in the meantime he can “pick off” as many Grade 12 courses as he can, in order to get his diploma on line. Kevlar told me he wants as much knowledge from high school as possible because most of those attending the college will be people who have graduated.

My thoughts have returned to Kevlar many times since then. At the same time I remember our first meeting when Kevlar showed me his Lotus flower tattoo. I am struck again by the simplicity and power of this symbol of hope. I imagine it as something that helps hold him together as he composes his life out of pieces, out of fits and starts.

A Narrative Account of Samantha – Marion Stewart

School and Life: Samantha's Story

The young woman who sat across from me was attractive, bright, engaging, considerate and candid. She offered to meet me at the university office because she was anxious to see the campus. This was our first meeting. Before this, we had only briefly communicated by email and phone. Samantha had seen a poster on a high school bulletin board and contacted me to offer her story of early school leaving. She was neatly dressed, friendly, and articulate. Her enthusiasm was contagious and I knew I would enjoy working with her.

I was anxious to hear her story. I wondered how this intelligent young woman, with such potential, did not make it through a regular high school. How did we, as a society, as parents, educators, and counsellors, let her down? Was there something that could have been done to help her get through? She had a very good start with a family that loved her and teachers who cared about her. What happened and what can we learn from this? I hoped our time together would offer insight into these questions.

Knowing her interest in seeing the campus, I had promised to give her a tour. Once we had reviewed research goals, our respective roles, and completed the required paperwork, we were on our way. It was pleasant July day. We headed towards the HUB mall as our starting point. Samantha was vividly impressed with the stores and services located on the main floor. I think she was picturing herself in one of the student residences that overlooked us. Some had their windows open to the mall. We stopped at Cookies by George for some desserts to eat later.

As we strolled the campus, Samantha told me a few things about herself. She had recently visited her cousin who was attending another university. Her cousin had shown her around her campus. Samantha said it had stimulated thoughts of attending university herself. She had some questions and I suggested that we stop at the administration building where we picked up the university calendar. It had the most up-to-date information about programs and admittance requirements. She thanked me for taking her there. I felt a little of the excitement I recently experienced when I took my daughter to tour three universities across the country. Samantha's enthusiasm was there, but I did not want to influence her decision one way or another. She expressed apprehension about her ability to meet the criteria required to enter university. She might have to upgrade some of her marks. I thought it was a realistic appraisal and a sign of maturity.

We settled on some couches in the student union building at the end of the campus tour. There were not many students around in July, so we were able to talk in comfort and anonymity. Samantha appeared nervous. It was apparent that she wanted to do her best to be helpful. With a little prompting, she began to provide an account of her life as it evolved around her school experience. She was very forthcoming while I gently guided her in a way to elicit a chronology of events. After an hour or so, she seemed satisfied that she had provided the most significant aspects of her story.

I did not see Samantha again until November. We met at a coffee shop just after she finished her shift at a nearby bookstore. She appeared exhilarant when she shared the happy news that she had received her high school diploma in the mail. I was thrilled to hear it because I could see how much it meant to her. Samantha had not finished her first

semester of high school before she stopped going. Since then, she had been enrolled in correspondence courses at her father's insistence. It had taken 5 years. A slow start and ups and downs along the way meant that it had taken longer than it might have. As she later described, once it became her own decision, she became diligent. She showed that she could do it – and with exceptionally good marks.

While the first meeting felt more like reporting, the second meeting was more reflective. Samantha spoke with added depth and attention to her thoughts, feelings, and relationships. The account that follows is a combination of reporting and reflecting. I have used word images – snippets of important events in her own words – for much of her story. Samantha provided a richer and more personal description of her experience than I could have hoped to. I begin by reporting background information to provide context. Otherwise I have attempted to let her words speak for themselves.

First, I would like to share the following reflection of my own. *The First Day of Kindergarten* is my interpretation of the story on which her story is set. It was based on what I heard, observed, and intuited from our conversations.

The First Day of Kindergarten

The first day of kindergarten, she clung to her mother's leg ... The safety, security, familiarity, and comfort of home and family were left behind. She was now to be entrusted to new people, within an institution of knowledge. Here she would spend a good portion of her waking days for some time to come. The knowledge and values imparted at her particular school would largely depend on principals, board

trustees, governments, and the perceived values of her community. Her teachers would take the mandates assigned to them and transform them into everyday classroom practices and educational curricula. This little girl had a particular role to play as well. She was supposed to learn. Notwithstanding her teachers' desires to do more, she was instinctively aware of limited resources. She understood that she was required to learn by paying attention and performing whatever tasks were asked of her, quietly, with skill, and with as little additional help as possible. She would be a good student then. The unspoken promise was that one day she would reap the rewards that having a good education can provide – meaningful work with a good salary. Education also means status in society, and the more she has – the better. If she followed the prescribed course, she could be expected to become a contributing member of society who might one day bring her own children to this door, or one very much like it. They might also stand frightened and holding their mother's leg, as this is a very common occurrence the first day of kindergarten.

Why volunteer for this?

I wanted to tell my story
and have it be relevant to something that could be helpful.
It's sort of like a redemption for me
I screwed up so badly by dropping out,
This kind of makes me feel better
Like it's actually helping someone for once.

Samantha did not remember much about her early school experiences. Preschool holds a memory of spray-painting a ball and playing in a sandbox. In spite of her fear on the first day of kindergarten, Samantha settled in and became a good student. She was attentive, completed her assignments, and did not attract negative attention from her teachers. Her marks were always near the top of the class. She recalled that her Grade 4 teacher kept her and other top-performing students in for recess sometimes. They received pie or cake as a reward for their achievements. Samantha was surprised the first time this happened, as she had *never really been focused on marks. Whatever she had been doing was working, so she never thought about it too much.* The exceptions were gym and music classes. Samantha was not a natural athlete and she did not enjoy gym class. In music class, her teacher made her and her classmates sing individually. She was told she was not a good singer. Nevertheless, as Samantha remembers it, *she always had supportive teachers, parents, and family members who were happy for even her smallest achievements.*

Samantha's parents separated when she was 12. It created a disruption in her family life that left her shattered just when she was about to enter junior high. The carefree days of her early childhood abruptly ended. Her father left and she, her mother, and younger sister moved to a less expensive neighbourhood. Her mother's distress was impactful and Samantha was particularly angry with her father. She was not told who initiated the break-up but she witnessed her mother's pain. Their financial circumstances were seriously altered and her mother had to return to the workforce. Much of what she

had previously taken for granted was torn from her. She took the adult role of comforting her mother, when she needed comforting herself.

Samantha's mother had been a stay-at-home mom. She had provided security, stability, comfort and availability to her two daughters. Her father's job required frequent travel so he was often away for days at a time. He was a good provider and often brought gifts for the girls. At home, meals were prepared, lunches made, children sent off to school, and so on. After school there were always other children to play with. Samantha's mother took care of them until their parents came home from work. This is what Samantha had been used to. Everything changed when her mother had to go to work. Samantha and her sister became *latch-key kids*. They were on their own after school and became responsible for making their own meals, getting themselves off to school, and preparing their own lunches.

My Parents' Divorce

This was a huge change for us,
Like we had no idea how to deal with it
Right when I was moving into junior high
It was this really, really difficult transition
Right when I was going through puberty
This huge clash of everything all at once
That triggered it, but I think the main issue was
I just didn't have the options or I wasn't able to find the options

To try to help myself out of it.

How My New Life Fit into School

I was going to McLeod

Which wasn't such a great idea.

It was with all these kids that...

Well, McLeod was the lowest on the junior highs,

But it was the closest to where we moved to, so...

I had a friend from elementary,

And I was saying,

I really don't like McLeod, I really don't like McLeod

I don't know what to do...

And she's like, Well tell your dad to bring you to this school, C. MacKinnon,

There's a girl's program. We get to wear kilts.

And that's what hooked me right in, and

Because she was my best friend from elementary,

I thought, I'll get to be with her!

And honestly, that was one of the better decisions that I ever made,

Because these were probably the best three years of my school life.

Downward Spiral

I'm sure it wasn't really a clinical depression thing

I think it was more a situational sort of thing

I'm not sure, I'm not an expert

Laziness, I'm not sure what it was

I think it was because I was brought up kind of spoiled

I didn't want to do anything for myself

When it came to getting up every morning, getting ready for the car pool stuff...

I think that's when it started...

I started getting more and more comfortable missing school.

If You Weren't Interested in School, What Were You Doing?

For the most part, I didn't do anything.

Most days that I stayed home

I would sleep until 2:00, get up, watch TV, go to the computer ...

Just waste my time completely.

Like, I just didn't care.

I didn't go out with my friends.

I didn't skip school to do things with them.

Never skipped school to do something better.

Even now, on my days off, I'll sleep in as long as I can.

I'll waste the day away, but you know,

That's just because it's relaxing for me now.

Back then, I liked it [staying home] way better than I liked school.

All I wanted to do was sleep, just laze around.

Concentration

When I was in classes,

Maybe even a little through elementary,

I had trouble concentrating on different subjects in school.

There were some days where I would just stare blankly at my paper

And not absorb anything.

I was completely distracted.

I still have trouble concentrating on things,

I don't know what it's from,

Definitely contributes to my frustration now

And probably back then.

It may have been just because I was thinking about everything else that was going on.

I can't really remember Grade 6 and Grade 5,

Anything before then.

Like I said, I wasn't really aware of what was going on.

When I was in elementary, I just put my head down and went.

I didn't care about how my marks turned out.

I think I got most of my assignments done on time.

I had that lack of stress,

I think that's why I did so well.

C. MacKinnon Junior High School

I miss that school so much.

I made friends for life there.

I just loved it.

There were only about 300 girls there

The classes were nice, the classes were tight

Everybody knew everybody

The teachers were really one on one with everybody.

Really, really great teachers

I went back to see my math and science teacher from Grade 9

And she's one of the sweetest ladies in the world.

But again, laziness or lack of motivation kicked in.

Laziness especially,

When it came to getting up every morning on my own,

Getting ready for car pool

Stuff like that ...

And then I started getting more and more comfortable with missing school.

Missing School

The whole thing with my parents had been hitting me kind of hard,

And, you know, through Grade 7 and Grade 8 I had missed quite a bit of school
But not like an amount that was alarming.
But come Grade 9, you know, I was getting letters from the school,
Because by the end of the year I had missed about 80 days.
It was just because I was so comfortable with staying home.
I didn't want to apply myself, I didn't think there was any point to it
I just thought to myself, no, this is dumb.

How Did You Manage?

[Marks in Grade 7 and 8] were doing okay, 70s and 80s for the most part,
I didn't miss a whole lot, but what I did miss,
Some of the lessons I would feel kind of lost [in Grade 9]
The teachers were really great,
They would help me catch up
If I didn't understand something, they didn't make me feel like an idiot.
They would always have reviews at the end of every week.
A huge help.

Surrender

Not even underachiever, not even slacker,
Just sort of gave up on it is what happened.
Like something in me sort of just fell out, maybe

My parents split up
That whole miserable time
Everything that happened just hit me so hard
That I just sort of wanted to give up altogether.
I think part of giving up was making my Mom and Dad angry
Cause I was angry at them
But no, I just didn't feel like exerting the effort
I just sort of stopped caring
I don't think I was consciously saying to myself
That I'm going to stop caring because I'm mad
I think it just gradually happened.

School Response

My ninth grade teacher, she was really, really wonderful.
I would talk to her whenever I was really down
But the school had really limited resources,
We didn't have a school counsellor
So there was really little else that could be done.
The principal would pull me aside and try to figure out
Why I was missing so much school.
We'd have meetings with my parents.
But my mental health or something

Nothing like that came up.
Nothing came up about how I was feeling,
It sort of felt more official than that,
Like they made it feel like it wasn't their business.
It was just about why I wasn't attending school
Or doing what I was supposed to.

I Didn't Know How Great it Was Till Later

I did miss a lot of school at C. MacKinnon
I did even prefer staying home in bed,
Even though I loved those years so much.
Like I don't think I realized throughout junior high
How much I'd miss it ...
But now I realize they were the best three years.
And I did have a lot of fun and I knew that much.
I knew I loved my math and science class,
Knew that I had great friends there and everything like that,
But I still preferred to stay home in bed most days.

Were You Depressed?

That's what everybody thought,
Like I was on antidepressants for a while [seventh grade]

They switched me off of about three or four medications

But nothing seemed to really improve or get worse.

12 to 16 or 17 [age on antidepressants]

Mom always tells me she saw a big change in my mood

But I never really noticed a change in how I felt

Still, all I wanted to do was lay around.

I didn't take good care of myself either.

Some nights I'd stay up really, really late

Just to watch movies or read.

You know, just anything to waste time.

I wasn't eating properly.

I would go without proper hygiene

Just because I didn't feel like it

I lost all enthusiasm for most things.

The Doctors

Our family doctor,

He was the one who suggested antidepressants.

He had suggested different kinds of psychiatrists

When that didn't work out, I went to see a psychologist

And she sent me to a psychiatrist who tried to put me on different medications.

It was an issue with actually going to the appointments.

Mom couldn't make me go.

I would resist as much as I could.

I was able to talk openly with them

But after I left the office, after the appointments,

I didn't really feel like, oh my gosh,

This is really going to make a difference for me.

It was more like,

Oh, now I have to come back later.

My Brief High School Experience

Stanton was closer to home and they had archery.

I actually just had to sell my bow because we don't have a range anymore,

The range closed down.

When I was in gym, we did a little bit of archery

And it was really exciting because I had to show my friends how to do it.

That's why I was so excited to go there.

Archery and physics.

I was like, oh yeah, I'm going to get all the best marks I can

And I'm going to have the best high school diploma out of everybody...

And then I got there,

And it just wasn't all it was kicked up to be, you know.

First (and last) Days of High School

I was excited

'cause one of my friends was coming with me to Stanton.

There would be familiar faces.

I think I was excited 'cause it felt like a whole new beginning

'cause it was like you're graduating from junior into high school.

Just one of those exciting things for kids that age.

I was doing good for the first week or two

But then I started to realize what I was getting into,

The different kinds of classes that I had,

The people I was surrounded with,

How many people I was surrounded with ...

And I just started to think,

Oh my God, Are you serious?

And then I was bored with my classes

And then all my friends were drifting away

And I just kept saying to myself

Is this worth it?

Why don't I just quit now and go work right now?

Earn money and get a new life somewhere.

I think that was a big thing.

Like I was still missing all that school and

I think the thoughts that triggered it were my teachers
Telling me that I would have to leave.
Like they would expel me if I kept missing
Or if I wasn't keeping up my marks.
Straighten up and fly right or you're gone, kind of thing.
They tried, they were like
We can set you up with the school counsellors
But I wasn't really having any of it.
You know, 'cause I was miserable.
I wasn't enjoying myself.
I think for the most part I was like,
Well I've failed this far,
I may as well just go the whole way and start new.
The ultimate option was just to quit school and
Go to work.

Reflections on High School

It's been what, 5 or 6 years since I dropped out
I didn't finish any of my high school courses.
I dropped out in the first semester in Stanton
I had missed so many days there that I didn't have passing marks.
I can't even remember the courses beyond two of them

English 14 – because I had missed so many days in Grade 9

So many days that my marks weren't over 65.

I was stuck in these classes that I really didn't belong.

It was way too easy, that English course,

Spelling exams for words that I'd been spelling since 7th grade in Grade 10.

Like, okay, why am I bothering?

The only reason that I did go for those first couple of months

Was for Japanese class, because I really enjoyed Japanese.

Unfortunately I didn't pass that because I missed so many days.

School and Life

That's sort of how I remember my life being

Is school with my life fitting around it

Not throughout elementary or anything like that

Because back then I didn't really care about my marks

But as I started to grow up,

Especially as I got into the later years of junior high and high school,

That's all that mattered to my family was school, school, school

And it wasn't even so much about the marks

It was just my attendance that mattered the most.

My dad and I fought a lot about school,

Dropping Out

When I was 16 and dropped out
I thought it was the greatest thing in the world
I was so excited, 'cause suddenly I thought to myself
I can spend all my time working and earning money
I wanted to spoil myself
I was so happy I was done with all that miserable school stuff
Because my Dad had told me once
That he dropped out of high school to get a job out here.
He told me that he worked at a gas station.
And my Dad was really successful,
Hey, it's like, he was a Project Manager
And he started by dropping out when he was 16,
Coming to Alberta and working two jobs.
At the time I didn't realize it was two jobs
I didn't realize how hard he'd been working
The whole idea of being able to quit school early and start earning money,
Was glorified to me.
I'd have my own spending money.
I'd be able to get these things I wanted.
I wasn't really thinking about the future at all.

Going to Work

Then I got a job

And I realized that it was a lot like school

It was a day-to-day thing and

I missed a lot of work

The longest I stayed before I got the job at Designer Flowers (in 2006)

Was five months.

Other than that, I just got weekly jobs,

Sometimes lasting two months at the most

You know, I'd get really gung-ho about it

I'd start and then I'd decide, no, don't like it,

Don't like all this effort

I really wanted an easy way out kind of thing

And I couldn't seem to find it.

I'm way better disciplined now

I don't miss work.

You're So Hard On Yourself

Everyone in the family is really hard on themselves

It's just a self-esteem issue

I can't say when it started but definitely noticing it since the divorce

Because my Mom sort of, she tumbled downhill really badly

And I definitely noticed things like that from her
I even get comments here at work, you're so hard on yourself Samantha.
I can't forgive my own faults as well as I can forgive everybody else.
Like just one thing goes wrong...
I'll be completely anxious about the tiniest thing that I've done wrong.
If I do something wrong, that's it, I'm just broken for a while.
There's definitely that bit of perfectionism in me
But I think that's because I wanted to get back so hard
Just to try and redeem myself for it,
For the mistakes that I'd been making.

Relationships

Dad

He was travelling all over Canada.
There would be times where he would be gone for four or five days straight.
So we'd see him for a weekend
And while we were all living together under one roof
My dad and I got along fine.
I'd sit with him on Saturday mornings and
Sunday mornings, watch golf,
Watch all these home improvement shows.

My sister and him and I would all be outside in the backyard during the summertime,

Building things.

We always got along pretty well.

But I think it was because we were pretty young,

Too young to give him attitude maybe.

Anytime he couldn't see us

I think he expressed that he loved us through gifts.

He would buy us things to make us happy

Because we didn't get to see him that often.

He was the breadwinner.

He brought home the toys.

So we were pretty spoiled kids.

After my parents split up,

My dad still wanted to spend time with us.

I was so angry, I was so miserable

That I didn't want to leave the house.

I just wouldn't do it.

I got to see him once in a while, once a month,

Once every couple of months.

And when we did see him, it was fun.

Arguments aside, my dad and I still get along really well.

We always did right through,
Just as long as the arguments about money and school were out of the way.
We're like best friends sometimes.

Mom

She's one of my best friends.
Uh, Grade 7 she wasn't. I was always upset with her.
Like she had to drag me out of the car to go to school some days.
We fought a lot. We still do fight,
But it's always one of the fights that you make up as fast as you can.
So, my mom and I get along really well.
One of the problems is that I think that sometimes
She's more like a best friend than a mother,
And I think that may have been part of the problem when I was younger.
She didn't really take on the parenting role.
Whenever she would get upset, she would talk to me as if I was her friend,
Like I was her shoulder to cry on.
Just like I was [hers], she was mine.
We were both a complete mess,
My mom took incredible care of us,
She was just constantly stressed out,
So that affected our relationship a lot.

Grandma

Before Grade 7 she was like the saint of the family.

Everybody always looked forward to going to see her.

I think we kind of kept it from her

How bad things were getting between me and my family and my Dad.

She knew we were struggling a lot.

But I never really went to my Grandma for help,

Just because it was sort of,

I don't really know how to explain it,

She was like a teddy bear that you just went to for hugs.

You didn't have to talk to her.

You just went there and felt better.

She's really old fashioned, but that's not a bad thing.

I just sort of feel like I don't want to trouble her with all this stuff,

Cause she's lived such an incredible life herself.

Sister

My sister was 10

She dealt with it a lot better than I did

She went through high school through correspondence like I did

But it was her choice, she just decided she wanted to do it like that

She's my little sister, but I look up to her a lot.

Friends

Sometimes I would go to movies with them.

Sometimes I would have them over.

I remember that I had a sleep-over on my birthday with about three or four friends

And that was a lot of fun.

But no, I can't really pinpoint any time where I was seeing everybody every day.

Sometimes I'd go for a week without seeing anybody,

Talking to anybody.

It made me miserable when I realized that I was missing out on so much.

When I wasn't sleeping

I tried to get a hold of my friends

But you know, everybody already had plans,

And then they would ask me out ...

I wanted everybody to come to me is what it was.

If they wouldn't, I didn't want to bother.

In Grade 7 I had left all my old friends back at McLeod

And the friends that I did have at C. MacKinnon,

Yeah, they sort of drifted away.

That was when I was starting to make some new friends

That stayed with me through the first part of high school.

But for the most part, I didn't see them too often at all.

Really, really big change when I started leaving my friends behind

And then it just got worse.

Because I think high school is when I really needed them the most.

The Internet

When I was staying home

Throughout Grade 7, 8 and 9

I would go on the Internet

'cause there was nothing better to do.

I never really had anyone that I would talk to on a constant constant basis

Until Grade 10ish.

Chat rooms, social chat rooms.

The chat rooms I went into had special rooms meant for teens.

Any given time there were people on line.

So I think that might have been how I survived all that,

Without all my friends,

'cause I did have that option to go and talk to random strangers.

It's kinda bad that I could replace my friends with complete strangers like that,

But that seems to be what happened.

As it is now, there's one friend that I talk to,

I've been talking to her for two years now.

I can't go a single night without talking to her.
But the difference between now and then
Is that I'm still living my life now.
I finished all my school work and
I would just allow myself to go on and talk to her if I had done all these things.
I think I just sort of grew out of the whole thing that made me drop out of high
school.
It sort of hit me, what an effect it was having.
That kind of realization would only come with being mature.

Could Anyone Have Said or Done Anything That Might Have Kept You In School?

There are times when I would look back and I would think,
Why didn't anyone stop me?
But reflecting on it more and more
I don't know if anybody could have done anything
Besides offer me a million dollars or something like that.
It was my decision.
I was a really stubborn person.
I still can be really stubborn.
It would have had to be a decision that I would have made.
Otherwise, I don't think I would have had the heart to keep going with it.
What's keeping me going now, what got me graduated,

Was realizing I need this if I'm going to get anywhere in my life.

That's the big thing for me,

Going back to school, trying to get back on track,

Is because I want to have a life again.

I want to be able to grow up and live my life to the fullest.

I want to be happy.

And part of that stems from getting a good education and

Getting a job that I love.

Back then, people were telling me this exact stuff,

But I didn't care.

I wasn't listening.

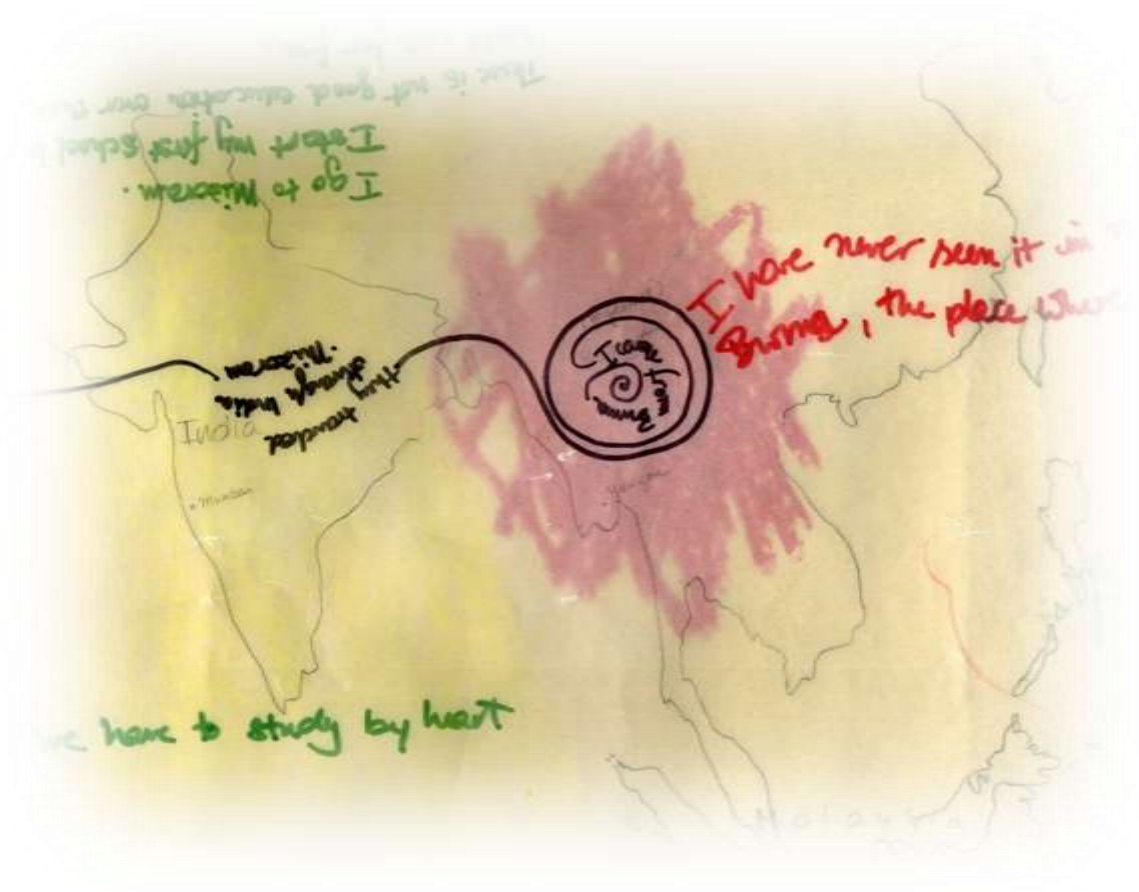
Samantha took responsibility for her situation. While admirable, I found myself looking for a place for some of the blame. I thought she blamed herself too much. She was too young to know about systemic influences. She appeared haunted by this story in a way that I thought affected how she felt about herself. I sensed that she was searching for understanding too. My parental self wanted to help her feel better and accept that she was also a victim of circumstances. Her self-esteem was wounded. It may take time and a few successes to rebuild her confidence.

I was searching for a villain in her story, but the villain was elusive. Each direction ended with self-blame. I was left with my original questions. What kept this intelligent young woman from finishing high school when she could have? Did we, as a society, as parents, educators, and counsellors, let her down somehow? What might have

been done differently to help her get through? There are no easy answers. My hope is that we keep caring, keep listening, keep trying to do better, and learn what children need from the adults around them. That may be a place to start.

A Narrative Account of Ben – Vera Caine

... where I am from ...



I will try and just write from my memory for now – no notes, no transcripts – just a couple of snippets taken from a larger map of Ben’s life. It is the image of a map I return to, both in actual and metaphorical ways, which lives in the stories I remember of Ben. His routes of migration both geographically and through different school systems and cultural experiences have greatly influenced his stories of school. Ben and I only met once at an urban shopping mall – a perhaps somewhat stereotypical North American

meeting place – as well as we had a few very brief telephone conversations; scattered among these were fragments of sentences with his mother and what I assumed was his older sister. These conversations happened when I was trying to connect and stay connected with Ben. Ben and I lived some 300 kilometres apart in the same Canadian province and while we managed to meet once, our lives become too busy and complex it seemed to meet again ... after many attempts I called Ben one last time and while he finds it challenging to meet again to negotiate his narrative account, he wants his story told. As I hear myself talking with him about the many insights I have gained from his telling and life I can sense his body straightening out, his voice becomes clear and has more tonal variance ... “yes, really?”, a mix of pride and disbelief. I reassure him about the use of pseudonyms and that his story is one of other stories and will be told in a larger context of school leaving. We end with a promise that perhaps one day we will have a chance to meet again and to revisit the occasion on which he told and the times in which I listened, restoried and relistened to his stories of early school leaving. My memory returns to our conversation that happened several months ago and I wonder what of his story has stayed with me, what has been forgotten and how I remember Ben. Wonders that opened up new understandings of his story, a story that resonates only at a distance with my own.

Ben was introduced to me through a colleague, who had made contact with Ben with the help of a counsellor. Before I ever met Ben, I knew he was an immigrant from Burma who had left high school and was now working for many hours each week. My attempt to piece together an initial story was marked by my struggle to understand a life I knew little about. I lacked the social-political, historical, and cultural context of his life. I

recall my anxiety and worry, my franticness in attempting to find friends who could help me ... as I struggled I began to wonder about my franticness, about my futile attempts to compose a storyline. Amidst this I began to wonder: would I be able to hear Ben's story as he told it? Would I be able to retell his life story? Who was he? What would he think was important for me to know? Where would he begin to tell? Would it be OK to ask personal questions that revealed my not knowing, yet were questions that didn't position him? I remember my sweating hands.

I arrived several hours before our planned meeting and I wandered the mall. The mall was a meeting place Ben had chosen, because it was close to his home and a place he had been many times. I remember walking in endless circles, looking into people's faces and wondering if Ben too would pace like I did. How would I recognise him? Getting closer to the meeting time I wandered to the agreed upon place and each time someone unbeknown to me would pass I would smile ... there were many smiles that day.

Finally I heard this timid voice say "Hmm, hello." Ben made no eye contact, and so, ironically, my smile probably wouldn't have made a difference. A few quick words and I followed Ben up the escalator to the food court on the second floor. I pointed to the far corner, a place away from the constant interruption. Ben nodded, which I read as agreement. He declined my invitation for lunch, coffee ... I was hungry, but I could wait too. We turned quickly to the research protocol and the signing of the consent form. I wanted him to know and I wanted to be able to begin recording our conversation. Remembering becomes difficult at times, particularly when I am nervous. Ben never looked up the entire hour, the only time he raised his head was when he looked out the

window to point in the direction where he lives and where he works. He looked up to point, however, I am not sure he ever looked at me. The conversation was fragmented, yet rich and filled with many wonders. Our conversation started and ended in many places it seemed, always simultaneous.



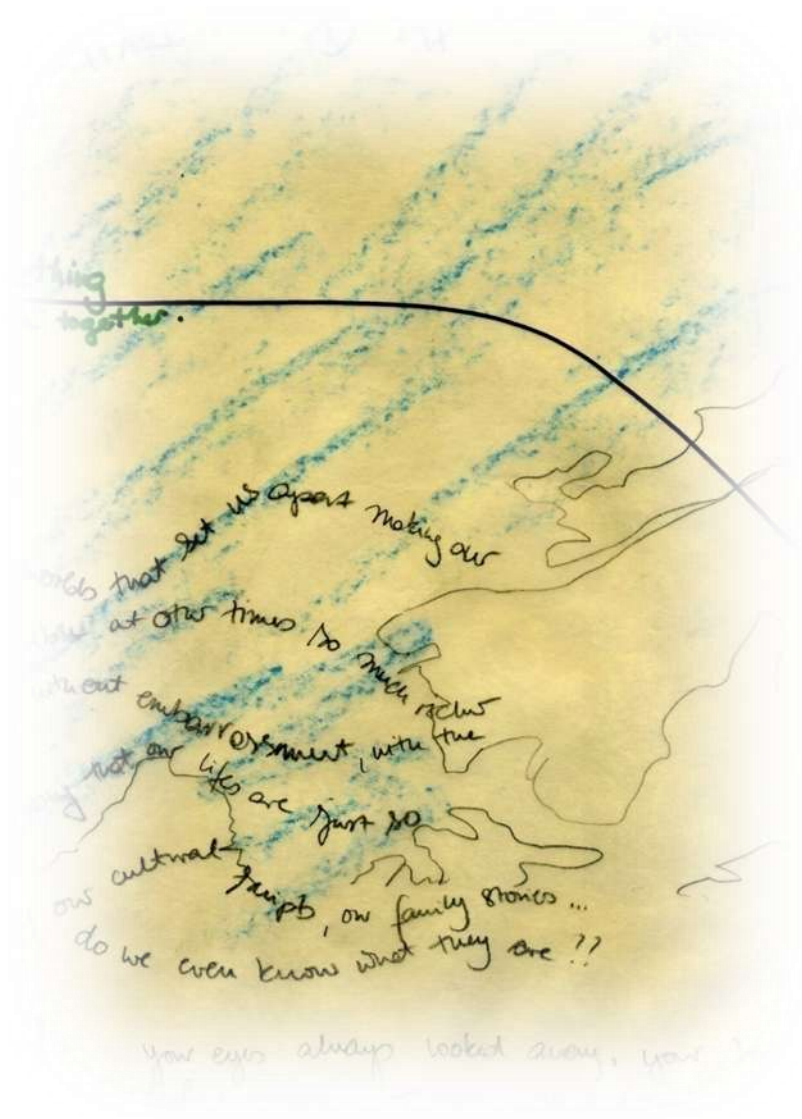
I have never seen it in my eye – Burma, the place wherever I go.

How did Ben learn about Burma? Where was he from? Was that the beginning of his life? He had never seen Burma with his eyes, but it was there in his stories, in who he was. He kept making references to it and his entire life was told in relation to Burma. I started thinking about my own life as an immigrant woman and how much of my own telling continued to reflect my motherland, my home. Do others hear these stories? And how do they hear them? Do others encourage us to tell these stories? And if they do why do they want to hear? My mind starts drifting as I listen to the transcript again. I recall Ben's story of his teachers in Canada.

Uh, I don't really like asking people personal stuff, so I just ... some teachers they just, I don't know, they ask me like personal stuff, like in front of the kids. And they share my story, like he came from that country and they can say. But I don't want that thing to be out but the teacher like asked me, from the teacher so I have to answer ... it was embarrassing for me.

Ben never talked about his embarrassment or his discomfort of being asked personal questions by his teachers or his counsellors; he felt the authority of the teachers and an obligation to answer. I wondered where and when Ben had developed his notion of authority and his lack of agency. Home mattered to Ben and as Ben kept returning to his stories in other places, I began to see how strongly his ability to relate, his sense of obligation, authority and discomfort might be shaped by this. Ben left Burma with his parents when he was two years old and at the time his family settled in India, or more specifically Mizoram. Yet, many relations of his family continued to live in Burma. Ben

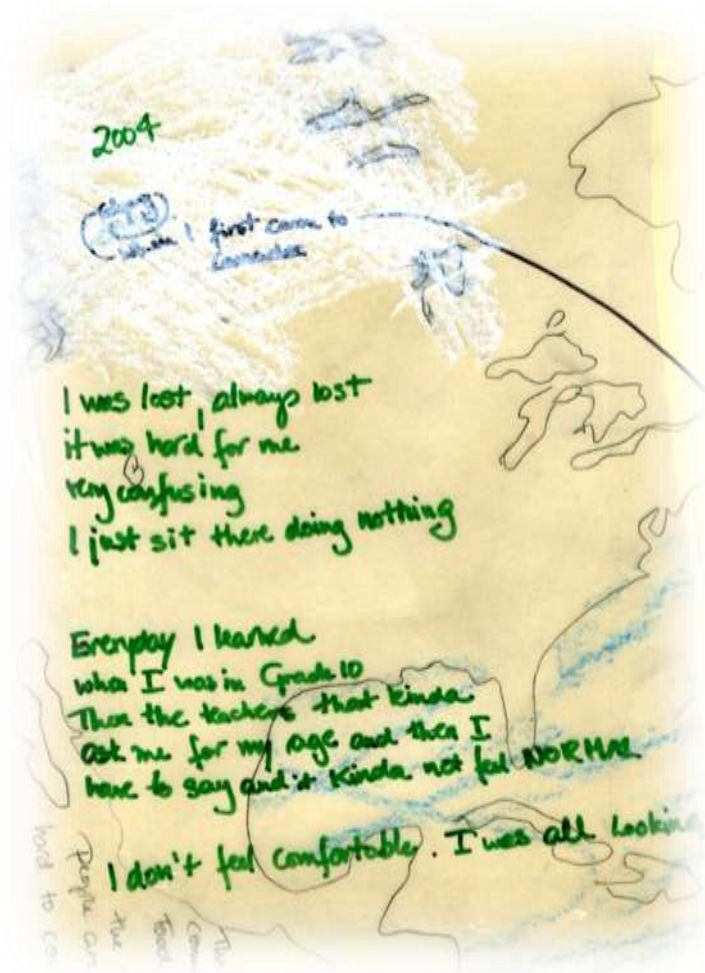
continuity across oceans, countries, different social-political contexts. He works now many hours so that his sister can pursue her dream of going to university. Perhaps one day she too will support him in his pursuit of education and schooling. "And then continue my study later when my sister and my brother they are done. They might have a good job and then later on they help me up, you know."



Ben talked some more about his sister and brother and parents and I can see the deep bond and the responsibility that rests on him and that he wants to live up to.

She [sister] told me to go to, like do the upgrading, but I always tell her like, uh then what are you gonna eat? You know and those kinds of stuff. You have to pay this rent and all those stuff. We can help each other later on. So I think this is Canada so we all have this chance. Like maybe study is not too late for, you know.

Ben's sense of responsibility combined with his beliefs that possibility still exists to return to school made school leaving perhaps easier and in a way a viable alternative. Yet, I kept wondering why he could so easily disengage from school, what were his school stories within the Canadian context. And as I listened to his words:



Ben had completed Grade 6 in India and given his age was placed into a Grade 10 classroom in Canada, a place where he still was older than all of his classmates. “When I first came to Canada um I don’t know pretty much English so I have to take ESL and I started from Grade 10.” He didn’t seem to have trouble adjusting to the academic challenges and when I asked him he said: “Back home we have to study by heart and then over here the exams, everything is in multiple choices and so it’s much easier. Once you read up you, it keeps in your head.”

There were some teachers Ben speaks very highly of, teachers who he felt understood him and could alter their teaching style to better help him. And there were others and, as Ben struggled, he tried to talk with them. “And then I fall behind and then the teachers start talking to me so I, I tell them out, I was coming from ESL and all that stuff, and then so they understand me in their heart.” Yet, the response of the teachers is something that Ben didn’t expect. “But after I told that some teachers say it to the class, right. So that’s when the problems drop in ... but and then, I don’t know, but I don’t feel comfortable. I was all looking down.” Ben’s words of looking down now as I sit here recounting his life’s story are a reminder to me of how I came to know him. Did he too see me as someone in authority, someone who might tell his story without asking him first? I am still left to wonder about this, yet he assured me that I could tell his story, perhaps our story reflective of the brief time we met. His sense of discomfort also grew in other places.

But somehow like I was already old for the school so I wasn’t feeling comfortable or something, you know ... and then the teachers kinda ask me for my age and then I have to say and it kinda not feel normal. And they ask me like personal stuff, like in front of kids. And they share my story like he came from that country and they can say. But I don’t want that thing to be out but the teacher like asked me, from the teacher so I have to answer. And then it was embarrassing for me.

Yet, there are also other teachers.

Uh, well, he like kinda understand I'm a newcomer and then he doesn't tell my personal stories to people, you know. And then he, he just like helped me out when people kinda ask me some stuff and I don't know how to reply.

Ben remarked about this particular teacher, "*I think he's been there in our country.*" I inquired into this and Ben didn't really know, but he sensed that he might have, or at least he seemed to understand Ben's story as that of a newcomer, his shyness and embarrassment and longing to be like others in the school, not one whose story stood out. In all of the stories Ben shared with me, he reminds me that he is not from here, he is not from Canada. The fragmented way in which he tells his story is perhaps indicative of the multiple struggles of a newcomer, of entering places that are unfamiliar and to which we are unfamiliar. While his telling is fragmented there are strong pieces of continuity at the same time, the continuity of his life amidst his family and the continuity of his art work. Ben did share some excitement about school, he continued to draw and got into animations. He volunteered many hours to learn not just the art parts, but also the videotaping and audio-video components. "So then we get along together and then spend after school. That's what I spend my time mostly, after school ... and then they removed that course." Just as Ben begins to find a place within school, it gets disrupted and the disruption this causes becomes yet another event in his story of leaving school.

I was waiting for that one. And that's the reason that I didn't even feel like going to school anymore you know. That was the only course that kept me still going to school. So it was not much students [in that class] ... Like every day when I wake

up in the morning it's hard, like when I don't have arts I, you know, oh there's no point of going.

A Narrative Account of Bubbles – Claire Desrochers

Coming to the Study

When Bubbles¹² and I met for our first conversation in early January 2009, he had been out of school for a period of 6 years. The study on early school leaving was brought to his attention by his employment counsellor at the Youth and Volunteer Centre where he was attending a work experience program. His current job placement was with a security company. Proudly wearing his security guard uniform when we met, Bubbles told me he enjoyed the work and was hopeful it would lead to permanent employment. As I listened to this soft-spoken, 22 year-old man tell me stories of his life in and out of

¹² The participant's pseudonym, "Bubbles," refers to a character in *Trailer Park Boys*, a popular "mockumentary" TV series in Canada. Bubbles is known for his hoarse voice with a strong maritime accent, sensitive nature, absent-mindedness, and coke-bottle glasses. Abandoned as a 5 year old, Bubbles lives in a tool shed with his kitties, who are his only family. Bubbles dislikes firearms and the danger his friends get themselves into. He loves kittens, bubbles, guitar playing, tractor trailers, rockets, model trains, and wrestling; his wrestling identity is The Green Bastard. He is perhaps the most responsibly-minded of everyone who lives in the park, often having moments of insight among the chaos of trailer park life and showing a larger general knowledge than most of the other residents. Trademarks: large glasses, magnified facial movements and expression, a love for the Canadian rock band Rush, a tendency to avoid getting arrested by the police, crying when stressed out or threatened. For the first few episodes of the show, Bubbles seemed to express an attitude of shyness, but as the show progressed, he eventually grew as a character and for several seasons was trademarked by his yelling "Cocksucker!" He is always seen driving on his go-kart carrying shopping carts. (*Trailer Park Boys*, Wikipedia, 2009).

school over three 2-hour conversations, I came to see him as someone who had started out with big dreams ... until life got in the way.

When I was little, I thought by 20, 22, I'd be some big scientist ... but then I stopped seeing that about 11, 12, and then I started thinking well maybe I will finish school, go to university, get my diploma in being a police officer. That was my dream for the longest time and then I quit school and it's like OK now just gotta find jobs to just get me by, I don't care, screw the dreams, they don't work.

The Early Years

Bubbles was born in central Alberta, but very early in life he moved with his parents and older brother to a small town in southern Ontario where both sides of his family had roots. He clearly remembered starting school at the local public elementary school, loving it and doing very well. Describing himself as a shy, quiet boy, Bubbles was an avid reader. Books were his connection to the world and he preferred them to interacting with people. As a child, Bubbles did not connect well with peers. He loved solitude, but also carried happy memories of time spent playing with his older brother. Younger by four years, I wondered if Bubbles had grown up in his brother's shadow.

I wasn't too friendly. I didn't make friends way back. I was kind of one of those kids that lots of people call a loner. A lot more people associated with my brother and just kind of forgot I was there. I felt kind of invisible and I kind of liked it a lot of times.

Partway through Grade 3, Bubbles's family moved back to central Alberta. A short while later, his parents divorced and Bubbles and his brother took up residence with their mother in a rural town called Pine Valley, while their father settled in a city a short distance away. Bubbles did not recall completing Grade 3 after the move; he stayed home with his mother for the remainder of that year while they settled in their new community.

A Story of Resistance

The following September, Bubbles was placed in Grade 4 at a faith-based school in Pine Valley, where his mother, whom he described as a "big-time Christian," worked in the kindergarten program. The school accommodated approximately 50 children in the basement of a church which doubled as a multi-age classroom. Bubbles did not have pleasant memories of a space "where all the grades were squished together, so I could all of a sudden be sitting beside a Grade 12 or a Grade 8." Apart from the kindergarten program which was housed separately, the school was run by a principal and one teacher. I heard the emotion in Bubbles's voice as he described the uniform students had to wear and the long days spent sitting in cubicles against the board where they worked on individualized programs. Bubbles remembered the faith-based school as a very tightly controlled environment.

Too many rules, dress code. I don't like dressing up in a uniform. Like they had nice pants, nice shirt, tie. I am not a tie person. So for me that was hell. Everyone sits in a cubicle. No one works together. I don't like working by myself. I'd rather

work where I can see people. You did your own work, unless you were in kindergarten, you didn't deal with the teacher.

From Bubbles's stories of his early years, I determined that two things sustained him: the company of his brother and his books. That year, he lost his connection to both. After only a few weeks at the faith-based school, Bubbles's brother decided to move in with his father so he could attend a public school in the city. Bubbles was not given the same choice, and stayed on alone at the faith-based school. He might have found solace with books but, in the absence of a school library, the only books he had access to in the school were textbooks. I was saddened to hear Bubbles talk about losing his reading hobby.

I enjoyed books. Even drawing was better than people. As long as I had my books I was happy. That's why I liked Grades 1 to 3 until I hit the Christian school 'cause there wasn't as much reading as so much looking at a text book and answering questions. Reading was just my hobby and it sucked because they didn't have a library there so I couldn't even get a book and go read.

Bubbles found the individualized program very difficult, particularly "when you're trying to do Grade 4 work and you know you're not supposed to be." It was hardly surprising that he was struggling given that he had missed part of his Grade 3 year. At the end of Grade 4, Bubbles was held back by the teachers who "didn't think I was smart enough to move on." A story of being known as a slow learner, begun in Ontario because of his February birthday, continued at the faith-based school. As Bubbles explained,

To them, someone that was just passing, I just barely passed to make my grade, so to them that was a slow learner, they figured everybody should be able to pass their stuff no problem, and that's why they called me a slow learner. And they had Mom convinced that I was a slow learner.

Lonely and struggling in school, Bubbles was often punished with the paddle for telling the teachers off. The more he was hit, the more rebellious he became. Bubbles explained that his behaviour was deliberate. Doing poorly in school and behaving badly was a part of a concerted effort to convince his mother to pull him out of the faith-based school and put him back in a public school where he had experienced success.

See they called it slow learning but, I don't know, I think it was more of a stubbornness. I knew people thought me dumb. I knew they did. I honestly didn't care. I figured if people think I'm dumb, Mom's going to start paying attention to me again. In Ontario, I was in public school. I was doing well, then we go to a Christian school and I'm doing awful, I really thought something would kick in. But my plan never worked. I didn't care. I figured the longer I was held back, the more I'd put pressure on my mom 'cause finally it got to the point where I did finish Grade 4 and was in Grade 5 and I started to be held back again because I wanted to. Like I knew the work, I could do it so quickly. I just didn't want to.

Bubbles knew he was being storied as a slow learner. His mother had always thought he would succeed well. Bubbles too saw himself as someone who had always been smart, who just played dumb when he wanted to play dumb. He explained he knew

he could pass. The more he stressed his mother with his failure and bad behaviour, the more likely, he thought, he would get sent to a different school.

Despite his best efforts, Bubbles's plan failed. It became clear his mom would not move him to another school no matter what he did. Eventually, in Grade 6, Bubbles decided he had had enough of the paddle. Just as his brother had done, Bubbles moved in with his father in the neighbouring city to attend public school.

A Story of Resilience

Although he was a bit behind when he started Grade 6 in a public middle school, Bubbles remembers quickly working his way up to the top of the class. He credited his success to one particular teacher with whom he shared a love of math and who took an interest in his life outside school. That Bubbles and this teacher remain connected to this day speaks to the close relationship they developed during the 2 years he was in her class.

Yeah, well she made time for [what was going on outside school] She still talks to me every once in a while when I go down there. Actually, still to this day, whenever I walk in there, she tells the whole class, here's one of my A+ students.

Bubbles was very happy during Grades 6 and 7 with this teacher. He made many friends, one in particular named Kevin, whom he described as "really quiet, everyone forgot he was there, so it was nice." Remembering that Bubbles had described himself as happy being invisible, it was easy to see how the two boys found friendship. They remained best friends and continued going to the public middle school together until Grade 8.

The significance of this friendship took on proportion when I learned what was happening in Bubbles's life outside school at the time. When he left Pine Valley for the city, he moved in with his newly married father and stepmother. Although Bubbles remembered getting along with his step-mother at first, things began to change after the birth of his step-brother. Tension in the family home mounted and Bubbles's stepmother began beating him. When I inquired about his father's presence during this time, Bubbles recalls the beatings only ever happened when he wasn't home. The disagreements Bubbles had with his step-mother often occurred over homework issues.

She hit me, punched me and she actually started taking my homework, if she didn't like it, she'd rip it up right in front of me and tell me to redo it. Like if it was a book report, she'd just rip it up. Say "OK, go redo it, it wasn't good enough," she wouldn't show me what was wrong, nothing.

As a way to avoid his stepmother, Bubbles started doing his homework at night and leaving the house very early in the morning. Bubbles ran away twice thinking he would be better off on the street, but that only made matters worse. Fed up with the beatings, he eventually made it to a youth shelter where he stayed for the better part of three years, between the ages of 13 and 16.

I figured I'd live on the streets, 'cause I had no contact with my mom for a year, so I figured my mom abandoned me. So I figured I'd live on the streets, make it myself. And then finally the police picked me up, and I said I wasn't going back there or I'd run away again, so the police put me in the shelter.

During our conversations, Bubbles referred to this 3-year period as his “shelter days.” I had a sense he had found some measure of peace, as well as the comforting presence of his best friend, Kevin, who was also fleeing an abusive parent. While partying and drugs became part of their life in the shelter, he and Kevin looked out for each other, managing to stay out of trouble as well as in school. I found their resiliency remarkable; it was hard to imagine these two young boys could stay connected to school given the lack of family support and living in what I could only imagine to be the realities of life in a shelter. But, according to Bubbles, it was the shelter that kept him going to school.

We were going through drugs, alcohol, school, all together. Well drugs I kind of did by myself, but we drank and still went to school together. And the only reason we could keep going to school together was because his biggest problem was math, which was my best subject. My worst subject’s social, his best subject. So we helped each other out a lot there. So that’s what kept us in school is we knew we had each other.

After nearly 3 years, Kevin left the shelter to live with a foster family. Unable to stay on without his friend, Bubbles reluctantly moved back in with his father. The beatings resumed, but once his teacher alerted school counsellors who in turn alerted authorities, Bubbles was removed from his father’s house and sent back to Pine Valley to live with his mother.

Back in his home community of Pine Valley Bubbles enrolled in the local public high school and managed to stop taking drugs. But the hardships continued. Prior to his

arrival, an incident involving his brother had left bad feelings in the community. Partway through Grade 9, Bubbles started receiving threats from former classmates of his brother's whom he described as the enforcers of the school. While Bubbles chose not to elaborate on the nature of the threats, I learned they escalated to the point where he feared for his life. He sought help, first from the teachers, then from the principal.

People came up to me and said, "After school, I am going to slit your throat."

Teachers had to walk me home, or drive me home because of these kids. I mean walking wasn't an option because everyone that's threatening me drove. I went to the principal and finally it just got too much that my mom finally had to say, "OK, I'm pulling you out of school" because I couldn't keep coming home scared.

Having a hard time sleeping at night even just because I was so scared because they knew where I lived.

Bubbles transferred to the local outreach program. Although it provided him with a safe environment, he found it oddly reminiscent of his faith-based school experience. Once again, he struggled in a multi-age learning environment where he was back to working on his own.

It was more of a go there, get your school work, go home. To me it seemed a lot like [the Christian school] again. There weren't cubicles or anything but you're working on your own. Teachers are no help. The principal's the teacher. The only thing different was there were two different teachers at the outreach. The one I didn't like was the math teacher; I didn't like him but I had to deal with him because it was my best subject. I didn't do so well.

In this setting, schoolwork became a real struggle for him. Bubbles became depressed, the stress aggravated his ulcer and halfway through Grade 11, just before his 17th birthday, he left school once and for all. He vividly remembered the moment. With emotion in his voice, he recounted how it happened. On that day, he had shown up for a final exam in math. He had worked very hard, knowing he could pass the test.

It was math, that's why I knew I could pass. I went, I double checked it after I was done two or three times. I knew I had it right. Get up there, teacher looks at me, just pushes it aside and says, "I'll do it later when I get to it." He had nothing else to do. And he just pushed it aside so I kind of just took all the books and looked at him, dropped 'em and walked out. I didn't even say a thing to him. I just got so mad that he'd just push [my exam] away like it's nothing.

I tried to imagine the scene as Bubbles spoke. On the one side of the desk I could picture Bubbles, full of hope, standing expectantly to await his results. On the other side, I could see his teacher, seated and probably absorbed in some other task. And between the two, lay the math test, until it was perfunctorily swept aside. Hearing Bubbles describe this exchange, I wondered whether this was really a moment that carried within it so many other moments of disappointment in his life.

Bubbles, it seemed, had already determined he would not be finishing school in this particular environment. Although he felt the teacher's behaviour was uncalled for, he went on to add that what was going on outside school was also a factor in his decision to quit school. At the time his mother was still without work. Bubbles explained that she had been suffering from depression for a number of years and had been surviving on a

disability pension. Her lack of work had forced her to sell her house and move into a trailer. And now, rent on the trailer was due. If Bubbles left school, he would have the opportunity to get a job to help out at home.

I may have considered staying in, even though I still hated that teacher. But I thought this gives me a perfect out, Mom's not working, she needs money, we need to pay the rent, it gave me a perfect out.

When I asked him why he felt he needed "a perfect out," Bubbles answered,

Because I couldn't just quit for the reason I hated a teacher. I thought if I did quit just because of the teacher, I would feel like the teacher made me quit. No, I decided to quit, so I had a way out then, it would be I quit, not the teacher made me quit. So yeah, makes a big difference. So it's not something kids should do, just find a way out, there's many ways out. I could've used my drugs, my alcohol, anything as a way out of school but I didn't. I could've said I needed money to get smokes, you know, it's all what I decided. And then that was a way out of it so I took that.

Remembering his experience at the faith-based school, it seemed there was a plotline of self-determination emerging in Bubbles's story. While he seemed to have all kinds of school-related reasons for leaving school, it seemed important to him that I understood that the decision to leave school had been his.

Basically, as soon as I hit Grade 11, I knew what was going on. I knew by either the middle or end of Grade 11, I was done. I wasn't going back. I had no intentions of going back to Grade 12. I figured at least I'd finish Grade 11, but I

had no intentions of going back again. If I had to I was going to go to a different school.

When I asked Bubbles if not finishing school was a concern for him, Bubbles answered that by staying in school until the middle of Grade 11, he had already surpassed both his parents' levels of schooling. Bubbles's school leaving was part of a family story of school leaving.

As it stands now, without me finishing school, I've got more schooling than my mom and dad. My dad quit in Grade 9, Mom quit in Grade 10 I think, the only reason my mom quit is because she got pregnant. Mom has no interest in upgrading. My dad has done a bit of upgrading but that's because he went for his mechanics so he got as much upgrading as he needed. He still doesn't completely have Grade 12 but he's probably done as much schooling as me.

Although his mother would have preferred that he finish school, Bubbles felt his father did not really care one way or another.

Living Out of a Suitcase and a Backpack

“Basically my life before recently, I could basically pack into a suitcase and a backpack. That was my life.” Once he left school, Bubbles's relationship with his mother became strained and he was no longer allowed to live in her trailer. His father, who had since remarried, would not make room for him in his home but agreed to let him live in a garage he rented. Bubbles therefore started his working life living in a garage. Provided with a heater and an abandoned van in which to sleep, he counted on the kindness of

neighbours for bathroom and laundry facilities and the local soup kitchen for meals. During this period which he referred to as his “garage days,” Bubbles worked nights stocking shelves at a local big box store. Although Bubbles found occasional small gifts of money left by his father in the garage, for all intents and purposes, he was on his own. While I struggled to imagine living in a garage, Bubbles made the best of his circumstances. He moved in his TV and gaming equipment and eventually invited a friend to join him. He enjoyed having no one adult to answer to.

I made it fun though it was horrible to get kicked out. Oh, I hated it, I hate my mom for it, but I made myself have fun. I figured if I’m going to be out and living in a garage, I might as well have fun doing it. ...I didn’t want to go to an adult shelter, they have confidentiality rules, living on my own, I could make my own rules.

In the 6 years since Bubbles left school, he has lived a life of transitions as he moved from job to job to get by. His living arrangements varied according to his work life. For the most part, most of the jobs he has held over the years have been short-term jobs because he “couldn’t handle the stress” of trying to figure out more permanent living arrangements. While he lived mostly with friends, there were periods when Bubbles was homeless and living on the streets. Given the challenges he faced during these years, I was impressed that Bubbles had rarely been without a job.

I’ve moved so many times I don’t even think I can keep track of all the times I’ve moved...I’m always working, if I’m not working, I’m bored. I have to be working. If I don’t have a job, I gotta find something to do.

As Bubbles spoke, I traced his work life since leaving school to 13 different locations in and around his home city. I was not surprised when he told me that through those years, he could pack all of his belongings in a suitcase and a backpack. Eventually, his brother took him in to keep him from going back onto the streets. At the time, his brother was enrolled in the youth and volunteer centre and it was through him that Bubbles would himself become connected with the program and learn of the Early School Leavers study.

Given the transitory nature of Bubbles's life over the last years, I was surprised when he brought a Bible to our second meeting. (During our first meeting, I had asked him to bring any article of significance that might help me learn more about his life.) Bubbles explained how it had become one of his treasured belongings.

When I moved back to my mom's I always had to go to church. So I could sit at the back and feel invisible and no one would bug me. I loved it, I got what I wanted, and people just left me alone. Except for the odd people who just kind of notice everybody even if you try to be invisible. They'd always come up to me, great big hug, they were trying to get me into the youth group and I didn't want to be there. I felt out of place, my attitude, I felt that God wasn't there for me. I finally got into youth group and then I didn't have my own bible. And what really got me going into it was one guy from my youth group who knew I didn't have a bible, so New Year's Eve, he comes to our house before I get home and leaves a bible there, signed "We will always care for you." So I still have it to this day. I'll never touch it, but I still have it just because it means so much to me.

I was surprised that Bubbles would own a bible, let alone value it enough to have kept it by his side through the numerous moves over the past 6 years. It seemed that despite his experience at the faith-based school and his objections to participating in the church community today, at one time he had felt a sense of connection to the church which he still valued today.

It doesn't matter how much I turn my back on the church or my mother, I always seem to have one person in the church I always keep in contact with. It doesn't matter if I hate the church, I hate God or nothing, I always keep in contact with him.

Composing a Life – A Sense of Family

Today, at 22 years of age, Bubbles remains in touch with his family but only distantly. He shares a hobby with his father and older brother, and visits his mother only when he's stressed. His sense of family now comes from his fiancé, a young woman he met at the youth and volunteer program, and the baby they are expecting together. Given Bubbles's experience of family, I found it particularly touching to hear him speak of their upcoming wedding and of himself as a father-to-be.

I want to be a dad. What best way to figure out how to be a dad than look at your own dad. Like I know I'm going to be a bit better father than my father was. He's already admitted it. The caring part. He was not there to actually care, he was there, but he was never around to actually show he cared. I want to be there and show I care. I don't want to be gone somewhere and barely ever see [my kids].

Also an early school leaver, his fiancé is struggling to find work. For the moment, they are both counting on the work experience program to help them find their way forward. Although Bubbles understands that upgrading would help him get the kind of job he would like (armed security work), his plans to go back to school have been put off as he plans a life around his fiancé and their baby.

That's the only thing to do, is keep going. Right now as it stands, the only thing that kept me going was my brother's kids. But that was before I met my fiancé and now it's her that keeps me going. Now, I got all this other stuff, now is school really that important? Not for me.

Looking Back

As we looked back over our conversations, Bubbles confided that he felt he should have finished school and worked at the same time, rather than quit school to work. He found the experience of sharing his story beneficial because it helped him see how his life story had led up to his leaving school early.

I think throughout the whole of my life leads up to why I quit school. I don't think it was that you just decide to quit. A lot of stuff that happens in someone's life is why they quit school. School has a big part as to why people quit but it's not the whole reason. For me school wasn't the only reason I quit, it was because of the stress in school, everything it was just stress and it mainly came from outside of school.

There had certainly been sources of stress on the school landscape:

The building, the Christian school, definitely turned me away from going to school. Definitely did not want to go...I think it was all the bullying that just didn't help. So that kind of just put my mind that OK, I now need to start thinking outside school, that I need work, I need money to support myself.

And Bubbles's out-of-school life had been complicated and stressful: "[Stress] is a major part of my life. That's why I started drinking and doing drugs was because I got stressed and I found that if I drank or did drugs, it calmed me down."

The attitude of many of his teachers, Bubbles felt, had compounded the problems he had faced both in and out of school. His anger and frustration were palpable as he explained what he had experienced when he had sought "help" from teachers.

I just didn't like the teachers' attitudes and that's what made me want to fail. At the time, I just generally needed help with school period, because I had so much going through my mind. All the stress on me, that's why I couldn't figure out things in school. Yeah, teachers just aren't any help 'cause they figure if you need help, it's just school-wise. They don't seem to think maybe it's something dealing with outside school. That's why you can't do your school work. I had told numerous teachers that's why I couldn't do my schoolwork. And they just never seemed to listen. They're like "Oh well, you'll get it." Well telling me yeah I'll get it is different from help. I needed them to sit down, listen, and maybe figure out what I can do.

Bubbles's Grades 6 and 7 teacher had been an exception. As he explained, unlike so many other teachers who kept their focus on his academic progress, this teacher had opened up spaces for him to talk about life outside school.

I was in one of those classes where the ratio of teachers to students was like one to three. But she took a lot of time outside of school, like after classes were over to help me with subjects. Like my English, I sucked at science, social, and she helped me with a lot of that. She was the first one to know even before the counsellor about me being beat. 'Cause I told her, plus she saw the bruises. She was the kind of teacher that I liked. She's the teacher I would have loved to have going through high school. So I figure if every teacher was like my Grade 6 and 7 teacher, kids would have it so much easier in school.

Still connected to her today, Bubbles described a recent visit to her class. He beamed with pride as he told me how each time he visits, she introduces him to her class as her A+ student. He is flattered by attention, admiration and respect her words garner from the students. It was touching to listen to him tell me of the time one student approached him for help in math.

Well I went over, I looked at what he was having troubles with, I made him show me what he did, showed me what he thought he was doing wrong, and showed him exactly what he was doing wrong and where he could fix it. It was amazing like I had been planning on doing something with the volunteer centre, some kind of mentoring for a kid...through the shelter upstairs, so the same shelter I was in. Yeah, well it's funny because some of those kids even go to that school. I've seen

them there, so it'd be neat. I think more of it as if I can keep them kids, preventing them from wanting to quit school because of this problem, then that's just one other kid that's not going to be quitting school right away.

Bubbles's early dreams may have faded in the face of a complicated life both in and out of school, but with this mentoring opportunity on the horizon, I came away from our conversations feeling hopeful for him...and grateful that he had agreed to share his school leaving experience with me.

A Narrative Account of Truong – D. Jean Clandinin

I first met Truong when Sean, who knew Truong from working with him in junior high school, brought him to the university. As Sean, Truong, and I stood in the doorway of my office, I knew that Truong was deciding whether or not he wanted to talk with me. Was I someone who he could trust? I knew his relationship with Sean had enabled Sean to interest him in the study but now Truong wanted to check me out. After all, I was the one with whom he would have the conversations. I was careful to maintain eye contact as I sensed there was much to learn from Truong's story. I could not help but notice, though, the tattoos on his arm.

Truong let Sean know that he would participate after meeting me. We met about a week after that first encounter on October 15, 2008, and again a week later on October 22, 2008. Three weeks later, Sean arranged for Truong, Vera, and another study participant, and Sean and me to meet up at Hamilton School so Truong could show us around the school. I knew from our first meeting that Hamilton School was a home place for Truong, a place where he felt he belonged.

It was as we began our second conversation that I asked Truong about the tattoos engraved on his arm. Truong described the first tattoo, the tiger, as his "Chinese Zodiac animal." He described the second tattoo, the dragon, by saying "in the Chinese tradition, it's like protection." He began to have the tattoos engraved on his body when he was 16 and, over the next 4 years or so, he added a Koi fish that "represents prosperity." One artist did all the tattoos except for a Japanese demon mask that he now regrets having done. In response to my wonder about whether having the tattoos done hurt, he said it

was “a burning sensation and a cutting at the same time. So almost like a knife and a lighter at the same time.” The pain he described helped me realize how important these tattoos were for Truong.

Moving Around: Returning Home

Truong went to one inner city school for kindergarten and moved for Grade 1 to Hamilton, a kindergarten to Grade 9 school, and, except for 2 years when he was in B.C., he was there until he completed Grade 9 and went off to Smith for high school.

At first Truong spoke of going to British Columbia with his dad but in a later conversation spoke of being in Nanaimo in Grades 3 to 4 with his “mom and siblings” and having “family friends” there. He said, “Like they were our neighbours and I think they came over to Canada with my mom, so like they knew each other from back home in Thailand.” Apparently they moved to Nanaimo from Edmonton earlier than Truong and his mother and siblings, as he said, “They were there for a few years already.” His time at the school in Nanaimo was challenging at first because Truong said he “was picked on by the cool kids” as he was “the new kid.” He described how one boy

got his little brother Tyson to come after me and try to beat me up but I ended up beating him up... and then they kinda had a grudge against me for the rest of the school year and whatnot, but I kinda kept my own, like I stood up for myself and I made my own friends and then we, we did get into, you know, clashes with them and stuff but they were little kids right, it wasn't sending each other to the hospital or anything like that.

The year in Nanaimo was marked by incidents in which Truong became involved in needing to protect himself. As he described these incidents that seemed similar to some of the incidents in Edmonton, he said,

I've had a pretty exciting life as a kid 'cause I, like I wouldn't want my kid to go through that or my little brother or anything, that's why I kind of, I'm more protective about things that I have, right, just 'cause I've been through it and it sucks getting stuff taken from you, especially from people you don't even know and you're walking down the street and not being safe.

When I asked how it was when he left Hamilton school again, this time for Prince Rupert with his brother and father, he said, "at first it was kind of, it was like going to Nanaimo again, right, it was like 3 years and then a year and then back for a year, and then away for another year" but he said he was "kind of glad it happened because I did make more friends." He described how when he first "moved there, yeah I didn't have friends at first but then I started making friends with the big kids, like Grade 7 kids, Grade 8 kids and stuff and we hung out and had a blast." Even though he had a good time there, he is "always excited to come back home. Edmonton was always my home...I love coming back home....'cause I always come back to my friends and ... the life that I know."

The Time of His Life

Truong described Hamilton School as his “most memorable time of school.”

When he speaks about his time in Hamilton School he describes times with friends like Kirk and others.

As he said,

My whole life I was kinda, I thought I was the cool kid, but our school was so small that we knew everybody so there was, like the guys that played sports or whatever and they always hung out together, then the girls, they always hung out together, and there was maybe a few outsiders I guess you would call them, but we would always interact with them right, but we wouldn't be kind of best of friends with them but if they wanted to play basketball, we'd play basketball with them, 'cause we all knew each other, right?

The way Truong described his experiences at Hamilton helped me realize he felt he belonged in the school and had relationships with the other students there.

As he said, Sean and his principal “put a big impact on my life because of what they've done for me personally anyways. Like a lot of teachers, like when I went to high school, they didn't care about me or anything like that, it was like, well my gym teacher cared because he knew my older brother.” The caring he felt in the school from the teachers clearly mattered to him. For Truong, teachers who care, always care about his “outside life, and what we've been through outside or what we do go through.” He said, “'cause it's like if I got beat up the day before, I'd go to school in the morning, [the principal] would be there and try, like what's wrong, what happened and try to solve it.”

Now, some years later, when he met up with his former junior high school principal he described the feeling as “awesome, just seeing him again.” He acknowledges that his junior high school principal “always told me to stay out of trouble and stuff, but it came to me and what had to be done was done...I’m happy ... he came back into my life as the same positive guy that he was before.”

Playing Sports as a Way to Make a Life

Truong describes playing sports throughout his time in school. He said, “I was in soccer all the way through” except for his two years in B.C. When he was in Edmonton he said, “I just kind of played school yard ball with my friends, after school, I’d hang out with my friends and play soccer or whatever. I played community soccer in Edmonton.” He said that he played in “under 9 and under 12” in community leagues. As he says, “And then junior high came around and I played for the school and we were, yeah, I got Athlete of the Year in Grade 9 and Rookie of the Year in Grade 7.” In junior high he “was more of a soccer guy and I was like, when I was in Grade 9 I was the team captain and we won the championship that year and we won, actually we won a lot of championships and I was captain for most of the teams.”

When we went to visit his junior high school, Truong insisted we go to the gymnasium where he showed me the pennants of the teams he played on. He also told me a story of a wealthy sports team owner who awarded him a scholarship for his skill in sports that would have enabled him to go to university. However, the wealthy man went bankrupt and the scholarship promises were not fulfilled. Truong thought he still had

some of the awards and he wanted to show me. When we entered Hamilton School that winter afternoon, it was a bit like entering Truong's life memory box as we looked at class photographs, stood in hallways as Truong described where he used to play and as we visited the gymnasium where he showed me the pennants which marked the times and places where his excellence in sports was recognized.

When he went to high school he played on the volleyball team and he was awarded MVP for high school volleyball.

For him, sports allowed him to not only to care for others and his own safety but allowed him to develop his skills. Playing sports in junior high also created some problems for, as he said, "sports kept me out of trouble and kind of got me into it too, 'cause I would have to go home at night and I would be walking home at like 9 at night and stuff" and, while he described the fun of walking home with a group of friends, there was the ever present possibility of violence on the streets around his home and school.

He described his life as "so I just kind of lived my life and played sports and just living, trying to survive."

The Spaces Between Home and School

The inner-city context in which Hamilton was situated created places of tension for Truong and other students. When Truong and I met at the school and he showed me around, we stood in the places where some of his stories were situated. From the windows of the school Truong showed me the places just outside the school walls where Truong needed to be constantly vigilant about protecting himself and others. While he

spoke of getting “into a lot of confrontations in the school” with “students that are from the other gangs,” he mostly situated the violence in the spaces between home and school. When we looked out the third floor school window, he pointed out a house across the street where older kids had lived that did go to Hamilton. He said,

We had a little bit of a problem with them too for awhile. It was like almost you're either with them or you're with us type of thing but we weren't really a gang...it was just us kids trying to stick up for each other because we're friends. And a lot of things happened to that school too, like neighborhood gangs and stuff would come to the school and bang on the windows and try to get in and stuff like that. Like I remember this one time we were in class actually. Everybody was in class and probably about 10 Native and White kids from around the neighborhood came to the window and doors and stuff trying to get in with bats and chains and stuff.

While Truong describes how the school building was under attack in the above quotation, it was the spaces between home and school that were most frequently fraught with dangers. Truong lived a story of being someone who would protect those who were weaker and might be bullied and beaten up.

Like I walked this one kid home, it was just me and this one kid and we walked through that alley that they, that they live in, because he lived in that ally. So we had to walk through there and they came out of their house behind the store with saws and bats, like I saw all these weapons. And all I had was a hockey stick because we played hockey with Sean and stuff. This kid was like, can you walk

me home and I was like yeah. And he's older than me, he's one year older than I am, but he's asking me for help. So I walked him and then this big kid came out and he, like you guys are walking in our territory, blah, blah, blah, blah, and I was like, you know what, do something about it right and I just kinda stuck up for myself and they're like, they just kept going on and I was like, well, you know, you want to do something, then do it right. And they didn't do anything and they let us go, so I walked my buddy home, walked back to the school 'cause I was going to play hockey again.

From the Thai Refugee Camp to the Inner City

Truong grew up in inner city Edmonton. He came to Canada from Thailand after a time where his mother and father

kinda ran from country to country just 'cause of the war. Because my dad got kidnapped by the army and stuff like that, and he escaped and then he would get kidnapped by another army, and then he would escape them and then run away to Thailand. And eventually he got kidnapped by the Thailand army, the Thai army, and then somehow they got out and came here, something like that so, yeah, my mom was left alone a lot because of my dad getting kidnapped.

Truong and his older brother were born in Thailand and he thinks he must have been about one and a half years old when they arrived in Edmonton. At first they stayed in a hotel and then settled in the Hamilton neighborhood that has since been Truong's

homeplace. He told me that while other people also came to Edmonton with them, no extended family came, “just our immediate family.”

Truong heard the stories about his family’s experiences.

We’d... just kind of sit around, like our family would just sit around and chat and she [his mom] would tell us stories and my sister would be very interested, so I didn’t care much for it because I didn’t know, right, so, but I do like knowing about it ’cause it shows how strong they are. It makes me want to do better for myself so we don’t have to go through that kind of stuff...it makes me kind of sad thinking that they went through that kind of stuff and that they made it.

While he was growing up, he did not think much about living in the inner city. As he said,

’Cause my neighbourhood that we grew up in was, I thought it was pretty, pretty bad, like I didn’t think it was bad when I was living there but then I would talk to kids from out of the inner city or they would be oh, my neighbourhood is so scary and whatever and when I went there I was like this neighbourhood’s so peaceful and everything’s nice here right? Like there’s no bums walking around or like hookers on the corners and stuff.

The stories he told seemed to revolve around a plot line of survival in what he now recognizes was seen as a “bad” neighbourhood. As Truong said, “Just growing up in the inner city was, it made me tough.”

While Truong has spent his life watching out for others and taking care of what came to him, he now says,

I don't want to fight anymore, well I've never really wanted to fight but ...when that kind of stuff comes around I'm just you know that, I don't, I don't want it.

'Cause I lived, I lived there right, like my whole life almost.

He described robberies and house break-ins as well as violence on the streets.

It was just kind of hard but that's the stuff we had to go through. It was kind of harsh so never really had nice things or anything. Just kind of had to survive.

That's why I relied on sports a lot so that's when Sean came to Hamilton School and stuff and we had like sports night and I always, I always went to it, every time he had it open, I was there 'cause I loved playing sports.

Truong relates who he is today to his experiences growing up, because

it made me who I am today, and I know that the street is an unsafe place because the police that's supposed to protect you isn't always going to be there for you, so you've got to be your own protector and what not, you can't really depend on somebody to be there... 'cause they're not always going to be there for you.

I heard in Truong's voice a sense of how he learned that he could not count on others, even the police who were "supposed to protect" him. He learned early to take care of himself.

A Family Home Place

Truong grew up in what he called "a broken home basically since I was like a kid." Truong grew up knowing stories of the escape to Canada and the stories of

how bombs would just go off and my dad would hide in like these holes and stuff that they had, like trenches that they had to dig up just for that situation, and they would stick my family, like my mom, my parents and my brother and I would be in those trenches and stuff.

He and his brother learned early to take care of themselves. His stories of his early experiences in a war zone (which he says he does not remember living through) as well as his coming from a “broken home” were stories that shaped how he learned to take care of himself. The dragon tattooed on his arm speaks to how often he needed protection as he walked to and from school and around his neighborhood.

My mom worked double jobs, four of us so like, you know nobody really, nobody could have got a job yet, 'cause we were young, right, so nobody could help my mom really, and my brother was kind of in and out of jail a lot, and then my little sister that's 2 years younger than me and then my little brother, who's 16 now, is 6 years younger than me. So we didn't really have a great start I guess.

Faced with needing to be responsible for himself and his younger siblings, Truong learned to be a protector and caregiver while his mother provided the financial support for the family. Truong speaks now of how much he loves his mother “because she's been through a lot and she's still surviving and so she's, I knew she was a strong woman and that's why I'm trying to make her life as easy as I can.”

Truong went back to Cambodia and Viet Nam with his mother when he was 17. He met “his cousins and auntie that I never knew.” He met relatives from both his mother's and father's side of the family. Truong's mother would like to go back to visit

and Truong “was going to pay for her and the family this year” but the cost was too great. Truong knows enough Vietnamese “to kind of have conversations, just not deep conversations about things...everyday conversations I can have.” I assumed Vietnamese was his first language as he was very young when he arrived in Edmonton. However, when I asked when he learned to speak English, he said, “I’m actually not too sure how I actually learned English but I’m pretty sure it was through school.”

Truong does not have connections with Vietnamese cultural or friendship groups in Edmonton, saying “I’m not too worried about other people’s lives, ’cause it’s hard enough to kind of live my own life.”

Truong became a father to a daughter two and a half years ago. His daughter lives with her mother, but Truong and his mother have access to the child on the weekends. He describes his daughter as putting “joy in my life.”

When I see her laughing and playing around it’s just like the greatest thing. So when she like, you know, she gives me like kisses and hugs and stuff, it’s like it’s a good thing to me right because I’m not used to it, like I’ve never kissed my mom in my life that I can remember. I’ve never, I’ve maybe hugged her once my whole life so I mean this kind of stuff is different to me. But she is my daughter and I do love her. And she is, she is the joy in my life.

I wonder if his daughter has, in some ways, interrupted the stories he was living and telling. Did her arrival and his knowing he was a father shift the trajectory of his forward looking story?

Losing the Coach, Losing the Team, Losing Interest

As we talked, Truong spoke of his experiences of leaving school. He had played on the volleyball team in Grades 10 and 11 and had experienced a great deal of success. But Grade 12 was different.

And then Grade 12 came around and there was no more volleyball...and so I was like, whatever, I don't really feel like going to school anymore. I got kicked out second semester of Grade 12. Like I did go to my classes and stuff but I was more of, oh I'm late, forget it, I don't want to go anymore or you know, stuff like that and I just didn't have motivation to go anywhere.

In Grades 10 and 11, he said,

If I was late I'd still go to school, if I didn't have a ride to school I would bus to school but in Grade 12 if I didn't have a ride I was, ah, I'm staying home today. If it's cold or like I bussed to school in Grade 10 a couple of times during the winter and stuff, right, and like, you know, but that's 'cause I had a game or practice or something after school so I wanted to be there.

As he looked back over this time in high school, he said,

I didn't care about the teachers, I didn't do anything, I didn't really have motivation to go to school really except for when I had volleyball...because my coach was my gym teacher that cared and he kind of kept me out of everything but... the only things I really cared about in high school were basically my friends and volleyball.

He had a “distinctive hair style” and was described as “the Asian guy with the bangs ’cause I had like spiky hair with two long strands coming down the sides.”

He spoke of his teachers in high school in the following way:

Like a lot of teachers, I don’t know if they liked me....but a lot of coaches and teachers and stuff knew who I was. They knew me for, like the person that I was and stuff but the principal or the student counsellor or whatever didn’t really care, didn’t, like I’ve known a lot of kids that got so many chances, like they, they fought or whatever, they got kicked out of school and then they would come back and everything’s good and stuff, right, but with me it was like OK, come to the office, you’re expelled because you skipped too much. And I’m like OK well, what am I going to do, I’m not going to cry about it right?

As Truong told me these stories about not being given second chances as others had been, I sensed he had learned to accept such treatment and to not fight back. He described that he “was like my own person with my own friends.” Truong has tried to complete high school. He tried to register “when I was about 18 or 19” in order to “finish up.” He attributes his desire to complete high school to the birth of his daughter. He has 70-some credits, so if I finish my Grade 12 I know I can graduate, and I really wanted to when I was 19, but then money came into play and all that stuff, and I was thinking like student financing and stuff, but I went to do it and they were like, No, you’re one day too old. So they cut it off at September 1st and that’s when my birthday is. ...I didn’t really try again ’cause money’s still in play, like money’s still an issue in my life, right.

He became a father at 19. “That’s why I kind of wanted to go back to school and finish up too ’cause she was my motivation for it.”

Taking Care of Others: His Mother, His Siblings, Kids Who Are Weaker

Truong has spent his life taking care of others with whom he has relationships. Truong recently moved out of the apartment that he shared with his mother and two younger siblings and into a three-bedroom house with a friend. When the friend moved out, his mother and his siblings moved in when their apartment “kinda fell apart.”

He worked from when he was about 15, at first with “under the table pay” when he “washed dishes and stuff for the restaurant” where his mom was the cook. The money he earned then was to “just kind of take care of myself and my mom didn’t have to worry about me too much right, like I’d have lunch money or whatever.” He learned early to help out with the finances at home, to take care of himself to save his mother from even more financial worry.

Truong has been a watchful big brother to his two younger siblings. “I built the rep of people being scared of me and stuff like that so my little brother and my little sister can go through school peacefully.” He learned to live and tell stories of himself as a tough guy, someone to be scared of, in order to provide his siblings with protection from harm. As he said,

I kinda lived the life that I lived basically for them to go through school and I’ve tried, I did everything that I can for them to graduate and stuff right, to go through school peacefully, you know get rides to school and stuff, ’cause I knew what I

didn't have is what kind of caused me to not to go to school. But for them, like I kinda told them, well my little brother more, to actually motivate yourself, to find something to go to school for.

In his words, I sensed he had learned, from his own stories, to live in relation with his younger siblings in ways that would provide them the support he lacked while growing up. His sister graduated and his younger brother found dancing and is well known in his school and in the community as a hip hop dancer. As Truong said,

I want him to get something for himself so he wants to do it all the time, right? Like with me it was I, I loved volleyball so much in high school. Like I had invitations to play for Team Canada and practice and try out with them but money was always the issue. I didn't have the money but now that I have a job and, you know, I'm trying to get money and stuff, whatever my brother needs for his dancing career or whatever, I would get it for him.

A Spiritual Life

Truong has spent time thinking about his philosophy of life. An "atheist," he believes others should be free to choose their beliefs. At one time he believed in "Buddha, the way people believe in god or a higher power." He still wears a Buddha necklace "because he believed Buddha was "a peaceful kind of guy" and Truong, too, likes "peace in my life...and my family's life...Buddha represents peace to me." Truong "just wants to live this life that I have as peaceful and as well as I can without suffering."

He no longer prays to Buddha but he does “pray that somebody doesn’t hurt me because it would be bad.”

Truong also spoke of a Chinese god who represents righteousness and loyalty.

Truong relates his thoughts about this god to the importance of being

loyal to your brothers...or your family. And that’s what I believe in...don’t hurt people for no reason or don’t do bad stuff for no reason but if it comes to you, then do what you have to do...I’m loyal 110% to whoever...that I like in my life.

As Truong shared his philosophy around loyalty to friends and family, I asked where he learned about these ideas. Triggered by “gangster movies and violent movies, like action movies” that mention gods, he uses the Internet tools, Google and Wikipedia, to just read up on this stuff. He went on to say,

And then I read on, like that’s why dragons, I’ve read things about dragons. Like there’s a red dragon, yellow dragon, blue dragon, green dragon, and they all represent different things. A black and red dragon is a fierce dragon so they’re more aggressive and, but then I think the yellow one is more passive and more about peace and stuff like that. I just kind of, just kind of read up on it and then just kind of do it.

He says he never talks to people about this but just does it on his own. He spoke of karma too which he see as a kind of “common sense” which he describes as follows:

If you hurt somebody obviously they’re going to come and try to hurt you. I mean that’s supposedly karma but that’s how people are, right? And then, but you know, if you hurt somebody’s family they’re going to hurt your family. So

everything comes back full circle...I believe in karma a lot and that's another reason why I don't do bad things for no reason. So if people come and hurt me then its bad karma on them because I'm coming to hurt you right after. And some of that can be a bit more spiritual. But I just live my life more physically than mentally...I just live my life day to day. You know, if you're good with me I'm good with you, and if you're not good with me.

Truong is very aware of how he

loved the fast life before. It was always go do whatever you want, you know, if it came, then it came. You didn't really care. But now it's like, you might pull out a gun today and that's the end of my life...like everyday somebody gets stabbed or some crazy person out there doing stuff to old people or young kids or whatever...You can't save the world but I can save myself and my friends, my kid, my family.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

As Truong reflected back on his life, he said, "just the life I lived was almost like I could have gone to jail any time basically." As Truong now turns to compose a forward looking story, he speaks of both himself and his daughter. He wants her

to live her life almost like how I think about life, just peacefully, and try to get away from whatever you can but stick up for your own...just show people that you're not going to get stepped on...so be your own person and do what you got to do.

A Narrative Account of Lynn – Joy Ruth Mickelson

I learn from Sam that Lynn is shy. Sam was a youth worker from The Red Cape Society and has known Lynn, her two brothers, and her family, from the time he had met them at Orange Way School where he was a liaison worker for families and their youths. Lynn tells Sam that she will meet with me only if he is present. She will have a look at me and perhaps talk with me and decide if she feels comfortable. Only then will she agree to being a participant in the research. She also needs reassurance that Sam will be nearby during the first “official” interview.

This first “look-see” occurs in a bustling Tim Hortons. Lynn is dressed warmly and her smiling face is friendly as she greets Sam with a hug. She and I shake hands and the three of us tuck ourselves into a corner to chat informally.

Sam’s presence is powerful for Lynn; he knew her when she was at school, knew her family well, and kept contact with many of them over the years. They begin to talk about family members animatedly. Lynn seems comfortable when I join in the conversation and make a comment or ask a question or two about a family member she has mentioned. As this is a “look-see” meeting nothing is recorded. I feel that, at this juncture, it will interrupt the easy flow of conversation if I take notes. I wish it was different because Lynn details eloquently names and contexts and I worry that I may not remember. Sam discusses grief and Lynn talks about not having grieved properly over the death of her grandmother, Christine, in 2003. Lynn explains how everything in her family fell apart when this happened. She talks about her grandmother’s partner, Peter.

As Lynn is telling me about Christine and Peter, her voice resonates with surety, and even though Peter died in 2007 and Christine 4 years prior, the strength of shared memories shine. I know that I want to explore the quality and depth of their relationship at our next meeting. Lynn talks of a goal of hers: to place a headstone at Peter's grave to honour his memory, "He was my dad."

I share what the research is all about and, if she is willing to participate, what is expected of us both including the signing of a consent form. Lynn says that she wants to tell her story and will sign the form next time but that she would like Sam to be nearby during the interview. We arrange the time and place to meet.

Lynn tells us that her boyfriend, Edward, will be coming to meet her at Tim Hortons. We have been talking for three-quarters of an hour when she sees him at a far door. Sam asks to meet him and they both leave the table. I observe the introductions from afar. Lynne has acknowledged Edward as significant in her present life and I wonder whether I shall meet him. We arrange a quiet place for our next meeting.

Sam and I meet Lynn and we make our way to a large table in a library. A nearby window looks onto a courtyard. Lynn and I watch a group of young men kicking a ball and we laugh at their antics as they communicate by gestures with someone in the library. Sam moves to a place where Lynn is able to see him. I wonder if she will feel comfortable to stay and tell her story. She does and tells it fluently and with feeling. The emotions associated with incidents that were painful are evident to me from her body language and facial expressions. Similarly when she told of joyful times and positive relationships she smiled and her voice resounded warmly. I read the consent form and

review the research. Lynn signs. I also sign and Lynn will take the form to her Probation Officer who needs to know Lynn's whereabouts and activities. "It really sucks."

Lynn had spoken in our "look-see" meeting about her family and their importance to her. We talk more about her maternal grandmother, Christine, and her partner, Peter, whom she refers to as "my dad. They were together, on and off, for 32 years." She reiterates, "He was my dad." Jane, Lynn's mother, is one of Christine's seven children. "She never raised us but she always came to visit. I knew my mom since I was a little kid. She lived her own life." Jane cared for Lynn when she was an infant for almost three and a half years, but when she was 5, Jane left Lynn and her two brothers, Kevin and Carl, with Christine. The overwhelming thread that emanates throughout Lynn's telling and retelling is that Christine and Peter were her guides, the ones who nurtured her through good times and bad, hers and theirs.

Our house was so homey, so when you walked in you just felt, you know, it was home. And everybody loved our home ... she made everything. If we wanted something she would get it. I know we lived good for her being on assistance and watching over us.

Lynn talks about her school, Orange Way School, in glowing terms. It is a junior high school.

I loved it. I miss those days. I have a lot of friends from when I was growing up as a kid. And we still talk about Orange Way. Like we're always "Oh. Orange Way." All of us still, to this day. We reminisce. I'm one of the most responsible out of all of us. I grew up around boys so I was always playing boys sports.

Lynn lists floor hockey, soccer and football and in Grade 7 volleyball, badminton, soccer and “tackle sports. I was sort of like a little tomboy.” She tells me about her two favorite teachers, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones. “They listened and you could talk to them. I loved Social and LA.” Despite the positive experiences she had lived at Orange Way School Lynn’s feelings about continuing her schooling change dramatically and she was encouraged to enroll in a store-front school for Grade 10. “[When] I was in Grade 10, my grandma found out she had lung cancer and that’s when I dropped out. Decided to help out with my auntie and them at home, because she was really sick.” Christine, even though her prognosis was poor, was still “watching over” Lynn. “My grandma wanted me to finish. She wanted me to go to school. But I felt I didn’t have to, or didn’t want to be there, dealing with that alone put a lot of stress on my family.” Lynn tells me that the program didn’t work for her. She couldn’t get engaged in any courses as there was too much else on her mind. She did go back for a couple of months in Grade 11. “But that didn’t work neither. I wasn’t interested.”

The stress of watching Christine become progressively sicker, which eventually led to hospitalization in an active treatment hospital and then in a long-term care placement, had its effect on Lynn and the family. She described the cooking and cleaning and hospital visiting and coping with extended family members who came from afar as adding to the stress.

We were angry at the whole thing that she was sick. It wasn’t our fault. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. But we were blaming each other at the time. It was just so different with our whole family. We were all grieving and we were all grieving in

the wrong way. I started drinking lots. My dad started drinking every day ... we all just turned to alcohol. And after she was in hospital for months and then she passed away our house fell apart.

Lynne talks of respect. It is an important value of which she is aware and it upsets her that she, too, becomes disrespectful.

People weren't respecting our house the way they were when my grandma was alive and we weren't respecting our place the way we should have. And it just became gloomy, really, really gloomy ... like from 6 months before to after it was a big change in everything.

The dark side of drinking was ever present. "I grew up around alcohol all my life and I've seen everything." The darkness overtook family members, and for some, addiction to drugs was added.

And that's just the way we seemed to grieve. And it didn't help. It just hurt more and it took me a real long time to realize that it hurt more. Like it wasn't going to bring her back. The crying wasn't going to stop.

Nor was the drinking. Lynn and Peter, consumed by grief, quarrel and argue. "He lost the love of his life and we didn't get along at all. We'd fight. All of us were so close all the time and we're all just splitting and it was so hard for all of us." After Peter, Lynn, Kevin, and Carl had been living separately for one year, in different parts of the province, Lynn makes an important decision because she misses them all. "I finally realized that I have to grow up, have to get my dad back here. I want to take care of Carl now. I feel lost. I need somebody and I want my brother with me."

Peter's death 3 years after Lynn and Carl had been living with him causes another upheaval for her. She was cooking, shopping, and working to pay the bills. The importance of coping, with very limited funds, led to her involvement in criminal activities.

I despise drugs and I was a hypocrite because I started selling it. It was a way of me taking care of my family, That's why I did it. I know I chose the wrong thing to do. I made the wrong decisions, but when you have no income. When you have nothing at all. And when you have to take care of your family, sorry that's just part of life. That's just the way some people have to go. And that's the way I chose. I know it's wrong. I knew I was in the wrong. I knew I was doing wrong. I knew I was hurting others ... I know I'm hurting people's families. I know I'm doing all that but I need to take care of mine. I need to support my family. I was taking care of my family. That's the only reason why I did it. ... I got greedy. I started getting money hungry.

Lynn is charged, her freedom and activities are curtailed and, rather than stay at her home, she discovered a day program for youths. The program has learning components which require group discussions and problem solving exercises "life skills sort of thing and it's prepping me for work." It arranges experiences in the workplace. For the youths there is no choice for where their "work exposure" placement will be.

I want to go back [to school], last week we were doing school testing to see what grade I was at and I'm surprised, 'cause I thought, like I haven't been in school in years. I was at Grade 9, 10 level. I thought I'd lost it ... Like I'm really bad at

math. I love Social and LA you know. I was a straight A student for that ... but when I started doing it it all came back to me.

Lynn has had a significant person in her life for a year. Lynn names him as “my boyfriend, Edward.” Edward has a good job and comes from the same rural area as does Lynn’s family. Lynn has met his mother who shows her approval of Edward’s choice by giving Lynn jewelry. Lynn is wearing the diamond and sapphire ring that Edward’s mother had given her when she stayed recently with Lynn and Edward: “I want you to have this ring.” Edward’s mother also asked: “When am I going to have a grandbaby?” I wonder whether Lynn feels pressured, but Lynn tells me: “My time-clock is running out, and “Anyway, we want a baby. He’s always saying to me, ‘Do you think you’re pregnant?’ He’s just waiting.” Lynn sounds sure about their relationship. “He’s a hundred percent committed. I know he is. He even talks about marriage. ‘I just want to be with you.’ He looks for the future and our baby.” Who will Lynn use as a “sounding board” to reflect on her options?

After our meeting when the recorder was not on we went to have a pizza. Lynn understood that I needed to take a few notes and she reflected on my interpretations of some parts of her story. For me, her sense of family, immediate and extended, was an important thread throughout. Her need to rescue them from addictive behaviours seemed a critical motivation for some of her actions. This speaks to her sense of responsibility which was often nested within divided/conflicting options. “I’m like that. I never learned [about responsibility]. I had to be.” Her sense of self-knowledge, her wish to continue her schooling: “I just don’t want to feel dumb. I will go back. I want to go back.” Lynn now

wonders – shall she upgrade her schooling or get a job? She has hopes of being involved in health care. Will she be able to manage a job and schooling? Will she be accepted into a licensed practical nurse or nursing aide program? She knows she has to make choices. She knows she has to rely on herself. When we wonder together about who will guide her in these choices, she says, “No one.”

I am aware how complicated these choices are. Lynne has shared that returning to school and completing her diploma are important to her. She wants to graduate from a post-secondary program – perhaps in the field of health care. The tensions for her may explain a reversal of her position when she responded to a question about who, recently, she had been seeing/speaking to in her family. Lynne replied, “No one. I am not speaking to anyone. I rely on myself.” She also realizes that she needs to earn some money for the future. She says that her work exposure placements have been good – she has worked in the kitchens – and, although hard, her work attitude was reported as positive. As a constant backdrop to these choices is her wish to parent a child with her partner.

At a meeting with Lynn on December 3, 2008, I suggested to her some threads that I had pulled from her words during our time together. I continued with a few wonders of my own. Our time and place to meet were muddled as Lynn had fallen asleep and was awoken by me. I shared the threads I had pulled. Her responses made me wonder whether she was still sleepy or whether the following threads I was suggesting did not fit for her and/or were making her uncomfortable.

Caring for Others

Lynn agreed that caring for others was important for her in her life. At school she was always concerned about her friends.

Learning from Others

Her role models were Christine and Peter, and from them she had learned much. Had addiction to substances been perceived by her as a way to ease pain, an escape, or will it have a deterrent effect? She felt she had learned much about its dangers and that learning will be a force in her life. She has also learned that it is important to grieve losses in a constructive way.

Learning from Self

Lynn acknowledged that she had learned much about herself, especially that side of her personality that responded to crises. Lynn has had to grow up fast and has faced multiple challenges. She has experienced relationships that have been meaningful and knows how to give and receive within them. A sense of yearning permeates her story.

Where School Fitted in My Life

Tied to these wonders were – what did school mean for Lynn then, and what did it mean now? A constant refrain for Lynn is how much she loved her school: the familiarity of the building, the friends, the teachers, and the opportunity to play all the sports. Had her world outside school not fallen apart would her reentry into a store-front school have

been different? Would she have found friends and teachers there and have become engaged in school learning?

Post Script – March 11

We meet to negotiate the narrative account. Prior to reading it Lynn shares an event that was very significant for her. It was the death of her uncle, her mother's brother. He was murdered. When she went to his funeral she remembered the warmth and fun of their relationship and she felt the loss deeply.

Lynn is enjoying her present job working in a kitchen and says she is given extra responsibilities and receives positive feedback from her supervisor. When/if the chief cook is away Lynn is responsible for preparing/cooking the meal for approximately 40 residents. We discussed how anxiety-provoking this can be. Lynn told me that she is hoping to move to an apartment nearer her work that is a little larger than the studio one she now has.

Lynn chose her own pseudonym but I had chosen those of others in her story. We laughed together as she commented on those pseudonyms. Most of them had significance for her and she wanted them changed. She chose the names and they have been changed. Lynn read the narrative account with great care. She clarified some incorrect dates which have now been changed. She felt that her grandma and dad, Christine and Peter, were not given the importance that they had for her in her life. I read the last paragraph of page 2: "The overwhelming thread that emanates throughout Lynn's telling is that Christine and Peter were her guides, the ones who nurtured her through good times and bad, hers and

theirs.” Lynn accepted that this did encompass their importance in her life. I said that the account was written from the transcripts and she reminded me that we only really met for three times. She observed that her career choices have probably changed now. She is definitely going back to school in the fall and may choose cooking as a career option.

I said that I would email Lynn with the corrections. We had been emailing and phoning each other regularly when trying to arrange meetings. As I dropped Lynn off at her apartment she asked me to phone her. Our relationship has not ended until it is mutually agreed.

Aware My Tense is Everpresent

to present your story my tense shouts present
you know the past, yours and theirs,
I know it too, have heard you tell
also of future, you give the due to temporality
the tension creeps and sometime magnifies
wondering why? oh why?
examines the space between, borders its liminality
verb ends question – is tension too high

and this is why, here’s my credo.
Your vibrancy and life writ in all tension give me no choice
to present your story my tense screams present

our sharing

Faces matter, color matters, places matter

it's hard to choose the one that fits your comfort.

we walk, we walk, we walk,

at last we find,

black face, white face, red face

we seat ourselves

eat pizza, words spring to lips

kalamata olives shaped in circles stick to melted cheese.

wind chill extreme freezes outside faces barely seen

bodies brace and stumble, angles sliced.

here we sit and eat, uncertain it's the place for conversation

a private conversation for all the world to hear.

the place is loaded, party group, singles, and we two.

Our bodies hunch toward each other.

Someone greets me, rushes over, starts a lengthy story on and on and on

a half-formed raise of eyebrow quizzes

will it ever end?

It does.

We talk. You tell the ins and outs of contexts and of time

of ups and downs, advances and retreats, of wonders and dismays
and more. I listen. and listen.

Respond then talk too much

have I destroyed momentum and your flow of telling
my search for threads too tautly strung

A Narrative Account of Zachary – Marion Stewart

Why I Left School

I guess it would have started when I was about 12 years old. I got diagnosed with bipolar and that's where I kind of lost my interest in school.

My uh mood swings. I would act a little intensely. I liked to make big deals out of little things.

And then I had this great idea in my head. I don't know, I wanted to kill myself. I was too stupid.

I just had a chemical imbalance.

I was doing stupid things.

Trying to cut my wrists. I tried going all surgical on myself. I even tried using a needle to drain me once.

Like that was from when I was 12 and I'm 23 now.

I had a hard time waking up in the morning 'cause my pills were a bit of a sedative. Um and then from there when I was about 14 years old I finally entered into high school and had the option that if I didn't show up for class all I had to do is sneak home and get to the phone before my mom did, and catch the message ...

And uh so I wasn't too interested at that point.

I didn't see any point in me going to school. I grew up with family members that have Grade 8 education, own international businesses, I just thought it was pointless. I can make money in the outside world. I don't need an education to do so.

And I guess that would have been the start of the decline. Uh, I was going to Madeleine Ulrich high school and it was a mixture of not wanting to wake up in the morning, not really wanting to go to school. The fact that I had seen I didn't necessarily have to go to school to make a pile of money, and the fact that I wanted to ski all day and do nothing but ski for fun.

My Mom & Dave

My mom was a single mom from the time that I was about 3 years old until I was about 7 or 8. She dated a couple of guys but never really got serious with any of them.

And then she fell in love with Dave out in Duck River. He owned a mechanic shop out there and my mom's car broke down so of course she took it in and fell in love with him on the spot.

... well Dave, the man that my mom met, he had three boys which, we were so young when we met each other, we consider ourselves like blood brothers. Yeah, we're all really tight.

He put more than enough effort into trying to hold a good relationship with me, but he didn't play enough of the waiting game to let me come around to him.

Well no, he played that waiting game, he waited for me to come around for him, but he just, he was great, he was too good. I could have never asked for anything better.

I've yelled at Dave, pretty much like wanted to spit in his face, and he's just like, he's a stupid kid. He'll grow up and thank me when he's older. And he was right, I did grow up and I have grown up and I thank him. I call him up, thank him out of the blue.

Dad

they divorced and my mom moved down to Duck River from The Big City, our dad would come to visit us every 2 weeks.

He'd do whatever it took. He'd come and drive down and there was times where Stanley [boyfriend] didn't want to allow my dad to see us so there'd be kind of butt whooping fights would break out on the curb all Maury style.

But my dad would do whatever it took to see his boys. He wouldn't care.

And he'd take us out to do fun things. Like he bought us dirt bikes and we'd go dirt biking every second weekend or we'd go skiing in winter.

Then we raced BMX he'd take us out to the Nationals or drive us out to BC or Saskatchewan to take us to race.

he put all of his extra coin into us as kids, 'cause I know everything costs a lot of money. But there definitely wasn't a not fun weekend with my father.

that kept up throughout our childhood pretty much ... until I was about 13 or 14 years old.

I was like 13 years old, I wanted to move away from my parents' house, I thought

I was gonna run away to my dad's house.

And I went and I lived with my dad, and he went from being my best friend to my enemy 'cause I was a little spoiled brat.

all he wanted was grades. It doesn't matter what you do, you keep your grades up and you're invincible with my dad.

he would be willing to crack the whip ... you go to school and that's the end of it.

You go till you finish Grade 12 and there's no ifs, ands, or buts about it or else I'll be taking that whip out on you.

But he never really hit us, he always had some long yelling lecture that we'd have to sit through if we missed a day of school.

School

from like Grade 1 to about Grade 4, I was a straight A student. I used to love going to school.

about Grade 4 was where the decline started. That's where my grades started to drop over anything.

Um my mom, she wasn't much of a morning person so as soon as she thought we were old enough that we could set our alarm clocks

and wake up and go to school, it was our responsibility to pack our own lunch and to hump it to school and back. There was no ifs, ands, or buts about it. It was set your alarm and go and if you don't go I'll know that you're home about noon when I get up.

Grade 2, Grade 3

my mom met Dave and we moved into a smaller city

[Dave] built a house for him and my mom to live in ... It's in the county.

There was definitely no walking to the city to go have fun with friends. There was just, miss the [bus] home and then you try to sleep overnight at your friend's house as long as Mom doesn't get mad and come into town and pick you up.

Leaving

yeah when I was about 13 years old. It started about, well Grade 6 is where it really started, my grades really started dropping. I didn't want to pay attention in school. I figured I was almost at that Grade 8 level that I could go and own an international company ...

You know how kids are. We're just brilliant that way.

so I started to put less and less effort into school.

About Grade 8 it was too much homework that I didn't want to do, so

uh why do the homework?

by the time I hit Grade 9 I thought I was a full-fledged adult ... just 'cause I couldn't drink in the bar doesn't mean I couldn't find booze on weekends. You know, smoke like an adult, uh do everything except for make money like an adult. I just didn't want to be in school any more. Uh the teachers weren't any fun to learn from any more,

lectures were just getting dull, sitting there learning about stuff that you think you'd never use in the real world.

I enjoyed science, I thought it was great. Grade 3, Grade 4, I had two teachers, Mr. Yardley and Mr. Gerald and they were like mad scientists, they made science so fun, all the fun experiments that as a kid you're like I totally got to learn to do that. I can make smoke bombs, they teach you how to make smoke bombs ...

the year afterwards that I lost [them] for teachers that's when the teachers started getting really strict. There's no more fun in the classroom.

You can't do this. You can't do that. Sit straight. Shut up. Head up. Sit. You know, back proper and everything.

And then I had Mr. Write, he was a high school [English] teacher, he gave us books to study like Led Zeppelin, the Saga of Led Zeppelin, as a teenager you can actually really get into, in high school you don't want to read The Catcher in the Rye, you're just told that you do it.

I loved Led Zeppelin, he's like here, read this and write an essay on it. You're like dude, yeah.

a horrible thing is I never really handed in essays ...

I started to come up with other great ideas like maybe I should work, just go full time and then I'll study part time.

it didn't help that I didn't really want to go to school. And the fact that I saw my uncle never went to school and he owns Stellar Cabinets with a Grade 8 education.

at the time I just thought like there's no point ... I don't need school. I can go out and build cabinets. I can make a couple of million dollars too.

after that I started thinking about all the things that I wanted to do, so I thought OK, I have some cousins that used to go out and they'd live in Lake Louise, they lived out at Fernie and work at the resorts.

When I figured it was my time to go out to the resort, in Grade 9, I left moved in with my brother. Started working full time. Seeing if I could handle the work situation pumping gas at Fas Gas.

I was going to school. I'd maybe go to like one class a week. Did that for about a year.

And from there I decided that I was going to move to Banff.

Banff dream

I would have been about 15 years old, and my great idea was OK I'll buy a bus ticket and I'm going to move out to Banff.

So I packed up everything I could, I had my hiking bag and I had my skis attached to it, enough clothes to maybe put me through for about a week.

the entire ride out there was oh my god, I'm moving to Banff, I'm moving to Banff, then I got out there and I realized, hmmm, I have no place to live, I have no food, I have no money, and I don't even have any resumes printed.

they have um a little employment area where you can type up your resumes and they have job postings,

I went in and typed up my resumes ... put my backpack, my hiking bag into a shopping cart and started pushing it up and down Banff Ave. handing out resumes.

almost the end of the day and I was hopeless, I was going to end up sleeping on the street,

some guy walking down the street asked me if I was looking for a job to start immediately?

I'm like does it come with staff accom? he took me to the Resort, introduced me to the executive chef ... and he said well what are you doin' right now?

He put me up in staff accommodation that night, I had to do a night's worth of dishes before I had my room. He said I had to earn it ...

it was all evening shifts, so I could go skiing all day ... skied all day, washed dishes at night.

4 or 5 months in, I had already missed a couple of buses on the way back to Banff, so you know, you are late coming back from the ski hill getting started at work,

it doesn't look too good when you still got your skis in hand, you're in all your snow gear, and you got your ski boots on, you come walking into the kitchen ...

And you're already an hour late for work, he knows where you've been ... You've been up all day, it's 5 o'clock, it's not hard to get to work for 5 o'clock.

So after that happened three times they fired me ...

I ended up moving in with a friend who ah happened to be dealing marijuana at the time. I'm like, perfect.

I'll start hawking my stuff to make rent. So first my skis went, and then my boots went, then my backpack ...

then I ran out of stuff ... so I had to call my mom up for a bus ticket and a way home.

I definitely fulfilled the dream I would have went through a mid-life crisis without it I think.

The Big City and Saskatchewan

I stayed [at my mom's] overnight and moved up to The Big City, and moved in with my sister, the oldest one.

worked in kitchens for a while, lived in The Big City for about a year,

and that's when I went back to school at the Learning Store, I took a science class.

my sister kept telling me if I went to school my rent would be free, and I kept

looking at the outreach school and I thought to myself I don't even have to sit in class all day, I can go learn and live for free.

my mom paid for me to get enrolled there, picked up my books and walked home, and that lasted for about 3 weeks, 'cause I enjoyed the science, so I polished the entire module system off in about 3 weeks. Got the course done with a 84%.

They were asking me what subject I wanted to do next ... so I took English for a week.

got to about two pages into the module and said I wasn't liking this, so I went back and I told them I quit.

I Said I Quit School Once Before, I'm Gonna Do It Again. I'm An Expert At It Now

From there my sister wanted to move out to Saskatchewan she had a boyfriend whose family was out there and I was living with them so I had no choice but to tag along.

So I moved out to Saskatchewan, worked at Treacle Grill for a while, which was another really nice kitchen that turned out really good for me.

And then her and her boyfriend broke up so she moved back to The Big City ...

The Gun Shop

... living back in The Big City I ended up having the great idea, I'm going to sell firearms for a living.

So I went and worked at Indoor Range and Gun Shop ... for about 2 years and sold firearms with a friend,

the guy that taught me how to sight a rifle, he looked at me and said, boy, so do you know what I do for a living?

I'm like yeah, you sell firearms, he said no, my wife's family owns casinos, I just do this to have fun.

Telford was the guy who I thought was like the greatest, he was my idol, right.

I always told him I wanted to be rich and he told me there is one quick and easy way to do it, and one day he finally looked at me and he said you marry rich.

he taught me everything like a son. He never had a boy,

He was like this kid's interested in guns and it's my biggest hobby,

Yeah he taught me the three piece suit, stand up straight, clean cut, speak proper, like the full meal deal, how to do business presentations, who you'd want to talk to. He even taught me how to pick an investor on the street. He says it's just like how girls find a man. You look at their shoes and you look at his watch.

Like he wore an \$80,000 Rolex, which was wow.

I'm like dude I could be driving a Lexus for that.

Yeah I get all excited when I start talking about Telford 'cause he, this guy treated me like gold ...

I had no clue what I had in my hands at the time either. I thought OK, all I'm gonna do is learn from this guy, just listen to every word he says.

And to this day I can still sight in a Weatherby rifle to shoot a dime at 100 yards.

Yeah. He taught me how to do that.

And he'd offered me to come work at his casino ...

he knew I was a hard worker and it's an opportunity to be, you know, be successful by the time I was 25, and be able to live in a \$1,000,000 house and drive a nice car.

And you know, work for a nice corporation and have great benefits.

I haven't seen him in 4 years now.

I don't know if I'll ever see him again because, honestly, he could be anywhere in the world..

Afterwards

I honestly want to try and be a multi-billion dollar earner like some people, but it's, we'll see if I make the grade or not.

you can't make it anywhere nowadays without an education.

I started doing a youth employment program. I've kind of always wanted to go back to school.

I wake up at 5 in the morning, catch the bus at 6 a.m., get to work for 7 a.m. I'll work till noon. At noon catch the bus over to here, go down to the classroom. It gives me about a half an hour to open up my books and study before class. Take a math class. Go home. Uh study. I put, for every hour of class time I put in 2 hours at home. I double it or at least try to.

And then go to sleep, wake up and do it all over again.

I've always wanted to join JF, or JTF 2 or Joint Task Force 2, which is the Canadian equivalent as a US Seal.

And you can't even sign up for the military now unless you have a minimal 33 credits, uh that's like Grade 10.

I'm like two English classes short of Grade 10.

it's easier in the military. They can't fire you. Um you don't have to think. You just do as you're told.

You don't have to feed yourself. Somebody else feeds you.

And it's a good government paying job.

... structure and discipline. I learned, yeah I learned over the years uh after living with my brother and going from structure and discipline to absolutely no structure and discipline,

you kind of you crave it. You get that craving for it. You're like well, why isn't somebody telling me what to do?

And the only thing that might stop me from going to school though, is I started part time with a financial brokerage,

their training program doesn't require you to go to school or to have a minimal education. You just have to be able to pass a broker exam. And financial brokers have no salary cap to their position.

So it's almost everything I was looking for other than the fact I don't know if I'd make it without joining the military first.

'Cause I think it'd be good for me to have some structure and discipline before I ran my own business as a broker.

everybody in my family thinks the military is going to be good for me.

'cause they know I've always been able to barely support myself

I've never been able to really strive or survive or,

like, be able to, you know,

actually thrive.

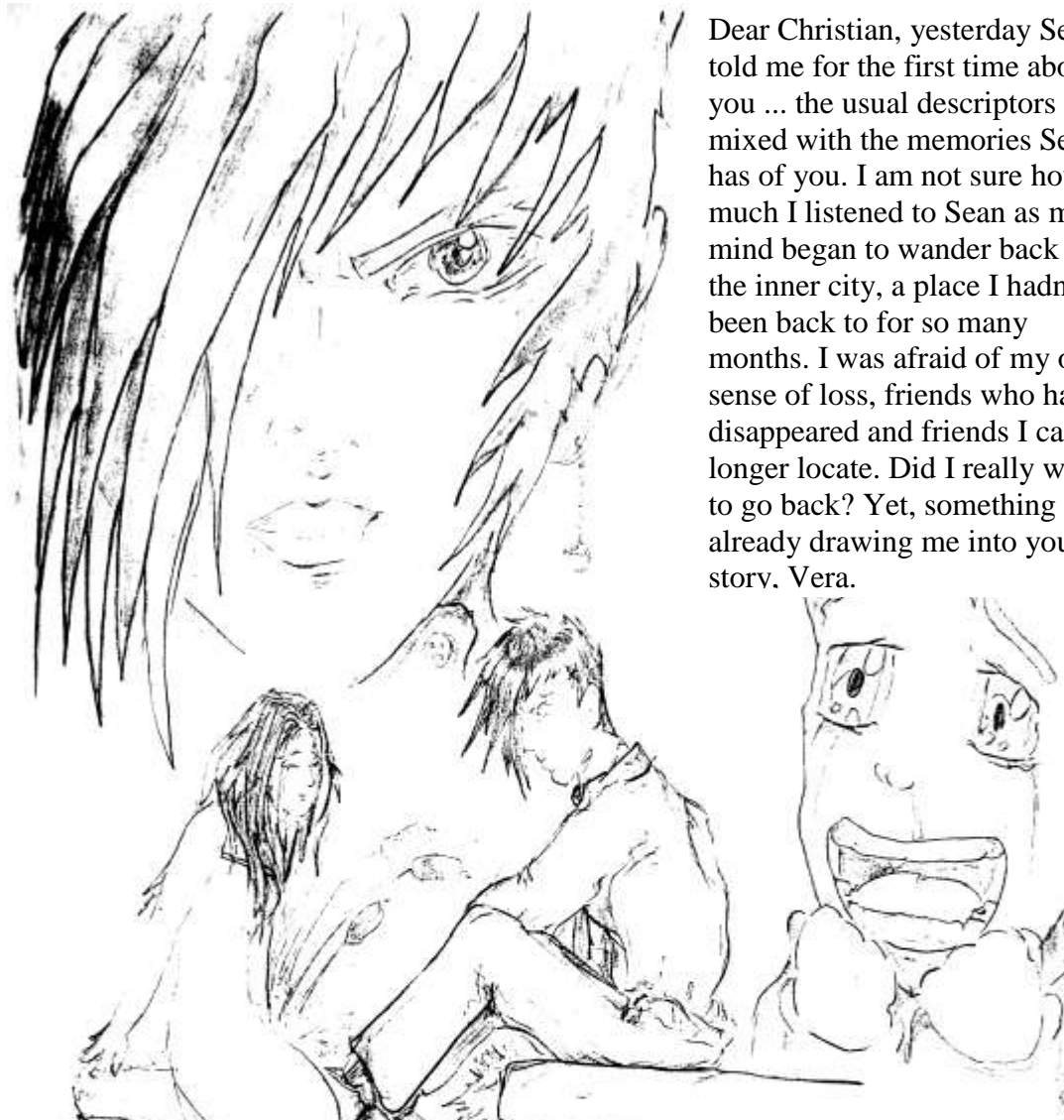
A Narrative Account of Christian – Vera Caine

I was introduced to Christian through Sean, who had worked with him as a teacher and coach in elementary and junior high school. All three of us met, and it was Sean's relationship with Christian that opened up the possibility for me to engage in conversations with him. Sean was always part of our conversations, either by joining us for lunch for periods of time or because our conversation returned to Christian's experiences of school. Sean, too, arranged for me, Christian, Jean, and Truong to return to the elementary and junior high school for a visit. Returning with Christian to this school, a school to which he felt a strong sense of belonging and ownership, opened up many backwards and forward looking stories for Christian and myself.

Christian was a very striking young man, quiet and with a very soft spoken voice. I was struck by some of his references to violence and the expression of the same in his drawings and tattoos; it was this tension between his demeanour and his stories that drew me into his stories and his life. Perhaps it was in our last conversation when Christian talked about why both the Phoenix and the dragon are representative of his life that I began to understand. The dragon, symbolic of strength, protection and power, and the Phoenix, representative of rebirth and change, in combination represent his life.

As a way to reflect upon our conversations I began to write postcards to Christian over the span of several weeks, which included two of our conversations and our visit at his elementary and junior high school. I then met with Christian again to reflect upon those notes and we engaged in another conversation, where Christian shared many of his drawings with me. In our final conversation we talked about some of his drawings, all of

which are included in this narrative account. The different texts are representative of different stages of our conversation, yet, as a whole, perhaps they reflect some of Christian's experiences and the context of his life, a life in which school leaving is a part.



Dear Christian, yesterday Sean told me for the first time about you ... the usual descriptors mixed with the memories Sean has of you. I am not sure how much I listened to Sean as my mind began to wander back to the inner city, a place I hadn't been back to for so many months. I was afraid of my own sense of loss, friends who had disappeared and friends I can no longer locate. Did I really want to go back? Yet, something was already drawing me into your story. Vera.

We sat in the same restaurant again, a place that is starting to feel familiar. A place where the waitress knows you, but not me. She smiles as she takes our order, yours without asking and mine with an inquisitive look that reveals she doesn't remember me. Talking with you now seems so different from when I first met you ... the ease with which the conversation unfolds is different, partially because the parts of your life that you have shared with me then have become a way of knowing you now. Your drawings are spread all over my office desk and I am in awe of your abilities and your thoughtfulness as you reflect on both your art and your life.



For the first time this is a picture that has a story behind it. It is my first picture before I got serious about drawing. It is a story about me and I turned myself into an animated character.



Dear Christian, I can still smell the sausages and bacon mixed with the smell of coffee. A place you come to every morning for coffee/breakfast after working the night shift at the local casino. Your small build and shy demeanour hardly let me guess you worked as a security guard, but then again I know little about that ... the lifestyle, the people, the craving for fortune just once. Who are you amidst this? It was hard for me to imagine where our conversation would go ... there was little for me to connect to. Your life was so far removed from school, it was a place you had been, a place as I heard in your and Sean's recollections that carries many good memories ... of basketball and baseball, of friends and amazing teachers ... I will keep writing and I am so glad we will get to talk more, Vera.

Tattooed on your arm are Chinese characters, characters that reflect what means the most in your life. I listen intently as you translate these characters for me: family, forever, friend(ship), companion. As you put all the words together I hear you say – “forever family and friendship.” As you say the words slowly, my mind returns to our previous conversations and I can see the tattooed characters are alive and embedded in all of your life stories. The leaving of school early was in parts the story of longing to be with your friends, of feeling isolated and lonely in a place that paid little attention to you. “I stayed for 5 months in school just to prove a point to someone, yet I wasn't enjoying myself and I had no friends. Stuck in the same classroom ... it made me miserable and I switched high schools because of friends.” And I so strongly hear your family stories too, of the responsibility you carried from a very young age.

Wrapped around the Chinese characters is a dragon to provide strength and protection. I wonder what kind of protection does the dragon offer you and protection from what?

Soon after Christian began to draw he started getting into traditional Asian art. This is his first drawing of that kind and “it is based on some of the things I saw before.” It is his first attempt at drawing a Koi fish, dragon, as well as flowers. Inscribed into the clouds is his name in Mandarin. Christian took Mandarin classes in Grade 10 and when he registered in Grade 11 he felt he had forgotten much of Mandarin and that it would be too difficult to keep up given that he did not speak the language in places other than this class.

Christian, I tried calling and e-mailing and we just didn't connect. Your tattoos have stayed with me, the half-marked pieces on your body, the pieces that mark who you are ... the joy in creating art that lives and breathes much like you do. There is no finality to your body art, always slight changes in the inscriptions of the final meaning. The changes in the transfer from paper to body are amazing, the layers of skin marked by a pencil stroke ... Vera.



“In grade 10 I had to go to the attendance board for the first time and I was really scared and afraid of being judged for my looks.” In an effort to not be judged, Christian cut his hair. He had many questions about why he had such a strong sense of being judged. He thought “if they get to know me they are having no reason to judge me.” He wanted to show them that he was serious about school and he went for 5 months to school without missing a day. He wanted to show them that “people can work their way through school, that people can change.” At the end Christian realised that he was only attending school to prove a point to someone! He switched schools and, after being at a new high school for 2 days, his grandmother passed away and he became very depressed and started to withdraw from school.

Christian, finally we get connected again. It all evolves quickly and tomorrow we plan to meet at the school, your school, the school where some of the happy memories live. A place you and Sean connected. A place your life mattered ... I want to know where you have been, become aware of your memories and experiences, yet I, too, am hesitant.

What will it be like for me to set foot into your memory box? Will I see/hear/smell amidst the fear of opening up my own memory box? Will I understand the communal context of your school? Will we meet people you know and those who know of you? Vera.



After some of his initial attempts at drawing, Christian’s pictures soon became embedded with symbols and stories; symbols that speak of his cultural background and also about the community and people who surround him. After a fight with his girlfriend and nothing to do, Christian spent hours drawing. He shared comments others have made about his drawings with me, that “the skulls have

character and look aggressive,” and in retrospect Christian thinks that he has been unable to draw skulls as good as these.

The skulls do look aggressive and portray a seriousness that is often associated with the human skull, perhaps a warning to those who fear putting their lives at risk, or perhaps a reminder of the transience of human existence, or in a way to remind others that one must die. Yet the skulls also remind me of the challenges that face many young adults and a challenge that perhaps also lives in Christian’s life, the wish to be taken seriously. The skulls might also represent defiance; the aliveness of Christian’s skulls certainly makes me wonder about the defiance of death and perhaps authority. Yet others might read the skull as a symbol of nightmarish youth, of violence, substance use and promiscuity.

“Evil looking that is what I draw when I am mad.”



Christian, I could see your eyes returning to every inch of the building, the changes in its physical structure, and always the seeking of the familiar. There was the desk/space you spent much time in, while remembering the stories you never spoke, the stories of the acts of disciplining. At least I never had the sense of punishment. Walking through the building was much like walking through an old Fort ... a sense of protection,

but also a separation from the inside and outside. My own footsteps still echo in my ears, the old brick and stone floors ... your life somehow shaped by the building and the peoples, Vera.

“My father is Asian, a Chinese born in Vietnam. I don’t know the language, but I have been interested since I was a kid. I loved it so much that I started to explore this. I got some support from my art teachers and near the end of my schooling I became interested in tattoos.”

“I was hanging out with older kids, like my brother. It was OK, but I got into things that were not good.”



Christian, my mind so often returns to the class portrait and for the first few years you and G. Always appeared together ... a foundation for a long and strong friendship. The photos almost appear comical now, the neatness and order that school/institution demands. You moved on from grade to grade, much like any logical progression ... your size and facial expression change, but I can always recognise you and I learn to recognise G. You become part of other families’ lives and I have a sense how school shifts who you are in your own family, Vera

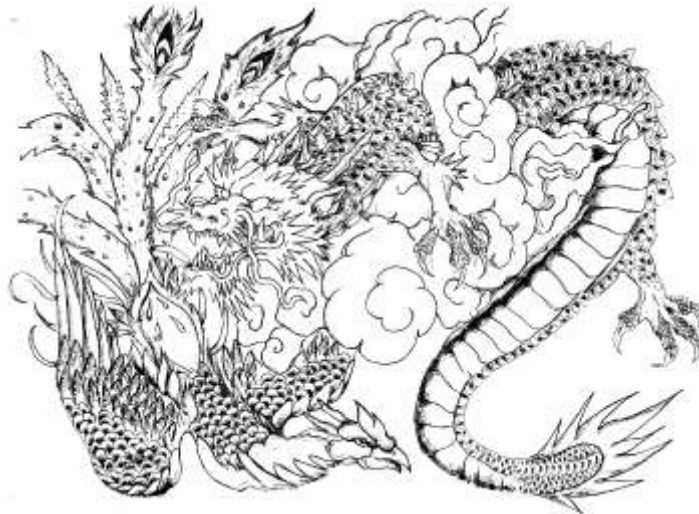
“I started off with stuff in the middle, cartoon images with me and my best friends. We all had similar hairstyles.” When I asked if the guns refer to some of violence in his life, Christian responded, “I thought it was cool when I was younger.”



Christian, you talk so proudly about your involvement in the suggestions for changing the school and the installment of sinks in every classroom. I sensed the ownership you took in your life at school, that this school greatly mattered to you; that you were thoughtful about your recommendations and how they would make the other students' lives better, I could see your eyes glancing over the banners and floor at the gym and I tried hard to imagine you here – day in and day out practicing basketball and soccer, being there with Sean and N. and J. learning his first dance moves, Vera.

Christian started to believe he didn't need high school and that he could just "live to work. But once I had money trouble, because my mom got really sick, I realised that we never really had enough money." Christian realised he needed school to better his career and now wants to study car mechanics and he is motivated to get back to school.

Christian – it was good to talk after the visit to the school, to get to know a bit more about who you are now and where you are from. I can see how complex life became after that first school, but there are many things I still don't understand such as why they kicked you out of school. Are there policies that school administrators indiscriminately apply? Why would they enrol you when they already had too many students? Why did they draw a line between you and your friends? And then to ask for money to enroll in distance education, to force you to work even longer hours, just so you could be told they didn't even have books for you; that you should come back weeks later. How did they think this was going to work? Somehow you were left to balance your future, your mom's, your sister's, your dreams with that of people who neither seemed to care nor knew you. There was no room for negotiation, no basketball scholarships, no room in the classroom, no place to sit beside your friends ... not because you chose to. Your mom too has needed your help and support and I can see in your story how much she has struggled in her life with mental health issues, poverty, violence and loneliness, Vera.



“People really like this because of the positioning of the dragon and the phoenix.” The phoenix was the first tattoo Christian got at the age of 16. “The phoenix represents a lot to me. That is why I got it on my arm; it represents rebirth and change and the female side. The dragon also represents a lot of me, strength, protection and basically power. Together, the phoenix and the dragon represent life. I used to have a really bad state of mind, and I used to do bad things and always got into trouble. Now I changed that, I started working, I support my family and now realise right from wrong.”



Koi Fish

The final image combines this drawing with digital colouring.

Christian – in all you told me about your dad – his coming and going and eventual absence in your life, his substance use and jail time – I can see how much you still care for him and how much you care about your own history. In all these times you have always still recognised him, even when he told you he didn't recognise you. I can't imagine what happened in that moment ... the hurt, anguish, the long absence accumulated, yet you talk so fondly of your cultural background, your care for your family and the importance of your father despite it all, Vera.



Christian – that day we also talked about your sister and how school was slowly becoming less and less important to her. You waking her every morning, your constant conversations of why it mattered – going as far as disciplining her, limiting her time with friends so she could focus and achieve at school, to stay with it. You left because there was no choice, there was your family to look after, to help your mom survive ... you seem so much older than your age or maybe it is that I understand so little about your life in its actuality, Vera.

“This is a Japanese warrior dragon, aggressive looking, all puffed up. I studied on-line about dragons. This Japanese dragon holds a crystal ball, which is supposed to carry everything close to the person, the most meaningful things.”



Christian – I still remember the end of our conversation that day when we talked about friends and children. You told of how you had held T.'s little one and said, "I was so scared," and I remember how your body and face looked so gentle, so caring and I was reminded of all the responsibility that rests on your shoulders, Vera.

"I was at work really bored and a friend suggested I draw a Cyclops – so I started with an eyeball and shading, to try and give more depth to it. Then I traced the face and placed it in position and then I set a light source. My friends call this the friendly Cyclops, because it has a cricked smile." I could see from his books of drawings that many of the pages had been turned many times and Christian informed me that many of his friends look at his drawings and make comments. Christian too shared his art work willingly with me, providing me with insights about the symbolism and at times the stories behind the drawings. The image of the Cyclops stayed with me for days, there was something so unbalanced and decentring about his.



As I turn the pages of Christian's drawing book I can see that his art work is more and more reflective of his interest in tattoos. He is playing with shading and scales, the intricacies of colour.

Christian, today I too went back to my own school, the school I left when I was in Grade 12. It seemed only like yesterday and as I stood there at the bottom of the stairway I could feel tears welling up once more. I felt so alone at the time and the place was too big to be noticed, no one would have heard my screams of injustice, of feeling boxed in. I wanted to paint, to write, to find space to listen and express, maybe one day I will find them. Hang on to your drawings, your body, love, Vera.



Dear Christian, I am so looking forward to Tuesday, to sit down with you again. I have thought much about you in the past few weeks, your incredible dedication to your family ... to fight but to also always find ways to move forward and live alongside you so closely. I can hardly wait for us to meet to take some photos of your tattoos and to get a better sense of their living on your skin. I hope we get to talk more about this. We started a bit in our first meeting with Sean, the differences between paper and body, maybe one day Sean can help us think about his again, but I know his stories of his skin are very different from ours. I often wondered about your mom and what stories she tells of you. And your lives together, her anxiety and what sounds like some depression are hard to cope with even with possible resources ... Thanks you so much for allowing me to hear some of your stories, I really am in awe of all you have accomplished, Vera.

For now this is the last picture in Christian's book, a Japanese half dragon and Koi Fish. "It is a Koi fish on a Japanese enchanted river; if the Koi fish is able to work itself over the waterfall then it turns into a dragon. Koi fish become almost magic – overcoming certain paths, reaching goals, much like swimming over a waterfall. It is almost impossible to swim over a waterfall and perhaps it is symbolic of my life. It represents my life a lot." This was Christian's last drawing in his book and these were also the last words he told me. It is in this story I recognise how important the tattoos and drawings are in his life. It is his drawings and thinking about tattoos that speak to his strong sense of visuality. Christian's life does reflect his effort and perseverance in the face of adversity, yet it also reflects wisdom, knowledge, longevity and loyalty. In Christian's story the Koi fish perhaps also symbolises this courage and ability to overcome life's obstacles, a successful struggle against the odds and a reminder that human suffering is part of life.

A Narrative Account of Skye – Sean Lessard

Prologue

Sometimes stories sit with me for a long time. I am not certain how to begin them. I don't always know the right way to share them or how to take care of them in an honourable way. I am learning. Hearing stories holds great responsibility and, as I write about the experiences of youth, I try to remember the voices of those who shared their stories with me. I am cautious when I write the stories of our Aboriginal youths. I am aware that stories can be read in more than one way. I try to think of a respectful way to write and share. I sit down often with the older ones in the community and the Elders and ask them to help me in this way. I often think of history and my own community and the stories that come from this place. I try to form an image in my mind as I write, thinking about how life might have been for our Elders, and the sacrifices they made to help us on our current journeys. The stories of the past help me, as I try to write about our youth and the challenges they face in their school stories. I am writing these stories with many thoughts on my mind. I am writing this particular story to help me to begin to remember again.

For the past 7 years I have taught at a large urban high school in central Alberta. In my previous role as a teacher in this setting, I often worked with youth who had difficulty finding their way and maintaining their school story. Many of my students of the past came from an Aboriginal place; some of the students embraced this story, others were in a state of development, and there were those who flatly rejected this script. I personally remember all those stories. I remember, as I write this, the difficulty in feeling

comfortable and negotiating my feelings of uncertainty. I do remember denying who I was and trying to move away from knowing my cultural past and the roots that will always exist within. I remember the feelings that many of my students have and I write this story from a different lens and a stronger spirit than in times past.

I chose to write this particular story because it is what lies at the base of Skye's song, her story of school as I recall it. I wrote this specific story for Skye and her family and the wisdom that they continue to provide for me in the form of cultural teachings. As I share this story now, I ask those that choose to read it, to think deeply with the heart and the mind, and imagine the beat of many drums playing in the background ... as each of you begin to hear the sacred songs ... you will start to understand her story in a different way ... I would like to call it a "dance me home song."

Bus Station Stories (First Meeting)

I was thinking about the many interesting people I had seen at the bus station as I waited for the arrival of a family that I had known in the past. I was wondering what our meeting was going to be like. It had been a long time since I last seen this family, and I wondered how they had been keeping.

I looked around the bus station and saw many people pacing, sitting, and talking as they waited for their bus to arrive. Each person had a different story, a unique history. I wondered what their stories were and what brought them to the bus station on this day. I sat in the bus station for over 3 hours waiting to connect with this family and to see their daughter, a student I once knew.

The nice thing about time is that it allows me to think and as I waited I conjured up memories from the past and jotted them down in my worn out notebook. I wrote down many ideas about the times I had spent with this student and her family. I waited impatiently, fidgeting, hoping that they would come around the corner at any moment.

The family I knew, and was waiting for, adhered strongly to their cultural belief systems and relied on the Nakota traditions to keep them balanced in a challenging world. I met this family years ago. I was a teacher at the local high school. I was introduced to their daughter by a colleague. She thought that we would get along well because we both shared a common cultural heritage. I never did tell her that I was Cree and that this student I met was Nakota but that is another story for another day.

Sliding Backwards in Time ...

As I sat in the bus station with my many thoughts, I remembered a particular day when I was introduced to a quiet young girl who excelled in sports and was from a nearby First Nation. The student I met had a unique and special name that stuck with me, it had meaning behind it. Her name was Skye. This young girl would barely look at me during our initial greeting, this was something which I had come to know and expect.

However, sitting in the bus station, I recalled that when I began to share my story with her, the space shifted and she slowly began to tell me about herself. I started the conversation by asking about her community and where her family was from. I always tried to help students to feel comfortable in that big school place. I wanted her and other students to know that they had a person that could assist them if needed. I often started

conversations by asking about home and the community to find a common ground; to find a beginning. I recognized long ago that this school was a place where students could get easily lost. It was different.

Later in the week I had my next meeting with Skye but in a different place. I entered the gym to begin evaluations for the volleyball teams. I had at one time in life played college volleyball and assisted the school teams with their practices. On the far court I noticed Skye. I watched with interest, a quiet girl come to life on the volleyball court.

Skye was amazing to watch. As a player she was fast and fluid. She was more verbal than I had expected, often calling out plays and shouting out instructions. She was naturally talented and played at a very high level. I found it rewarding to watch her play this sport so freely. We had unexpectedly found another common thread. I was quietly proud of what I was seeing on this day. Skye was creating a different story for all of us.

I had the privilege to watch and informally coach this student athlete for the next 2 years. She came to me for help with training and skill development, always separate from her team. During these times we had many great conversations about life. She wanted to learn and always strived to become better. I appreciated these teaching moments.

Through time and the many games that were played I was eventually introduced to her family who never missed an opportunity to support their daughter. Her father, Arnie, was small in stature but projected a feeling of strength and commitment to his cultural path. We had many good conversations. They started off small and formal and

developed over time, much like any good friendship. I often talked to Skye's mother and she always greeted me with a hug and kindness. Her mother was also a traditional woman, kind and dedicated to the values of her people. I enjoyed my conversations with Daphne and still see her gentle smile in my mind; it impressed on me the importance of family and happiness.

This is the family that I came to know during the school years and conversations that took place. I remembered that when I watched a game I always looked for them in the crowd. I often went and sat with them as they sat by themselves, alone and away from the rest of the parents; it is here where we visited. I have always loved sports and I could understand Skye's feeling for the game. It was her real reason for coming to school, not that much different than mine when I was young. Her family strongly supported all things that contribute to a healthy lifestyle.

An Invitation to Stand in a Different Relation

One of the memories I recalled as I jotted down thoughts in my notebook was being asked by Skye's father to represent the Nakota Nation in a hockey tournament. Her father had found out that I played in First Nation's tournaments competitively and they asked me to join them in a memorial tournament for a relative.

The invitation and the meaning behind the tournament still remains a highlight of my time with this family. I remember one afternoon, hearing a knock on my classroom door. I walked to the door and peered around the corner. There was Skye, her father and her brother all waiting for me to reply to the invitation, and asking me if I could leave

school early to make the first game. I chuckled to myself and told them that it would not be that good of an idea for me to leave my class in the middle of the afternoon to play hockey. However, I would most definitely be at all the other games. These stories of family stayed with me long after they took place. The hockey game was just a game. The gesture to walk alongside this family and play in the memorial tournament for a relative and their First Nation meant a great deal to me.

The moment I walked into the dressing room to play for their community felt different than other teams I had played on in the past. I met many family members from this Nation and, before we started the game, the coach, Skye's father, prayed. I recall the prayer specifically because we did not ask to win but to play safe and honourably and respect the other team and our First Nations in all we do. I remember the prayer because it was in two languages, and powerful in its message. These words stayed with me long past the event because we played for something different on this day. Stories of experience like this shifted my views and provided me an opportunity for learning by observing what was going on around me. This was a teaching.

The buses continued to arrive and depart. As I sat and waited in the bus station, many new faces appeared but I searched for just one as I scanned the crowd. To understand Skye, I need to understand her family. Skye is nested in the midst of family stories and family stories are cultural stories. Family is what Skye talked about often, it is what came first in her life. It was different than what I have ever experienced.

I had arranged that initial bus station meeting because I wanted to get her parents' thoughts on a project I was involved in at the university. I wanted to tell their daughter's

story of school. I needed to see the family and ask permission to talk to their daughter about a subject that had been difficult for everyone. I wondered what their reaction might be to my request. I wondered if it was too sudden or if time had allowed healing for this story.

The Arrival ...

I sat in the local bus station restaurant sipping on old coffee and anticipating that I could see this family at any moment. It was going to be great to reconnect for the first time in many years. I had waited far too long. I wondered what Skye even looked like now. Would I recognize her? I wondered how she was doing in life. What type of job did she have?

As hours passed, I began to realize that I might have missed Skye or perhaps I hadn't quite understood the departure times. Even though I felt like going home after waiting for so long I decided that I would sit and wait. There was one last bus that was leaving in an hour. There was a chance to still see them and I was determined to follow through and see this out.

As the clock crept closer to the last bus leaving for her destination her family suddenly appeared at the sliding doors. The wait was worth it! I immediately packed up my belongings and made my way to greet them. I was so happy to see them and we gave hugs all around, first to Arnie and then to Daphne. We laughed about our mix up in times and we laughed harder when I told them how many cups of coffee I drank while I was waiting. After several minutes of laughter and reconnection Skye made her way

through the sliding doors. It was great to see her on this day. I went up to her and gave her a big hug. I had so many questions but they would be for another time.

I recognized her but I also worried about her when I saw her. She had lost quite a bit of weight and looked somewhat tired. We both laughed when we greeted each other and, in our own way, we sent messages through our jokes. I told her mom and dad that she needed to eat more, and that she needed bannock and soup to help her get strong. And, in her response, she told me that I needed to eat less bannock and soup because I had been getting too big. We laughed. This is the way it used to be and it was like old times in this moment.

We took a seat and talked, all of us together, sharing as much as we could in the limited time that we had. I told them about my work at the university and that I wanted to talk to Skye about her school story. She reassured me that it would be no problem and that she would be happy to participate. The only concern was that we didn't know when the next opportunity to talk would arrive. Skye's parents helped us with this next part. Arnie and Daphne proceeded to tell me that they were hosting a round dance in honor of Daphne's father. They explained that it was the fourth and final round dance for this important family member. I remember hearing them say "Come out and visit. You will learn all the kids' stories. We invite you." With these simple but powerful words I knew what had to be done. I sat with Skye's parents as she boarded her bus, making her way down the road to her new adult life. It was so good to see her family on this day. I am glad I waited. I wonder how the story would have changed if I had left.

Taking me Home – Helping me to Remember

A month later I found myself making preparations for the memorial round dance. I was still trying to find the perfect gift to bring to the ceremony. I looked at many places but always came back to a quilt that I spotted at the local mall. The quilt was crafted with fine details and it had a picture of a bear and a fish at the centre, creating a picture in my mind worthy of this special event. I looked at this quilt and thought this would be an appropriate gift to honour the elders. It felt right. It had been many years since I had made my way to a round dance. I went through scenarios in my mind trying to recall the proper protocol and how the event takes place. I was ashamed that I could not recall all the details; how could I have forgotten?

As I drove out of the city, I was thinking about the event and the significance. I was trying to imagine what this day was all about. I knew the invitation was special as this was the fourth and final round dance to celebrate the life of Skye's grandfather, Paul. The round dance started at 4 p.m. and was to finish at 4 a.m. with specific events to commemorate the day. I knew I needed to be there on this Friday night. The family had invited me to walk with them in their world, to share their stories and become part of something bigger. I knew that, in their own way, this kind family was teaching me, showing me a different way in life, one that I was forgetting.

I arrived at the dimly lit community hall and many cars lined the parking lot. From the outside the building looked somewhat run down, in need of some paint and repair. I knew what people saw when they looked from the outside. But I had been in these spaces before and knew what to expect. As I walked through the doors I was

greeted with the familiar welcoming scent of sweetgrass. It always leaves a gentle haze in the air and invites me to relax and open my mind to the sharing story that was taking place all around me.

I entered this place and listened for the sound of the drum. I looked at the centre of the hall and watched the stickman pass the drum sticks to a lead drummer. The drummer started with his family song, with many other men young and old joining around the table, to celebrate through the beats and voices of communities tied. I was beginning to remember. I continued to make my way to the middle of the hall where the drummers played. I watched as 15 to 20 drummers played a song together and sang in unison. People gathered around the drummers and held hands and started to move to the music, shuffling to the beat of the drum, in a circle, always a circle. I was here at a different place, a good place.

Many feelings came back to me as I heard that initial song played; the drums and voices are still on my mind. Seeing our people dance together makes me proud. The beauty of family and sharing was all around me and I could feel it. Now, as I write, I still remember it. As I listened to the song I looked for the patriarch of the family. I needed to find Arnie. I had protocol and the gift of the quilt that I needed to present to him, to honor this day. I did start to remember.

I found him at the back of the hall and walked towards him with the quilt tucked under my arm. We greeted each other and I presented him with the gift and protocol. He thanked me for coming and told me that he would find a special older one to pass my gift on to. I had never been with Arnie at an event like this. It was special to see. I can see

him as I write this, and I can recall the events of the evening very clearly; they stay with me. He is a traditional man and he believes strongly in family.

As Arnie showed me around the hall, he introduced me to many of his family members. He invited me to sit with his family at the front of the hall and to help out when called upon. This was an honor that I proudly accepted. All five children were in attendance and his grandkids often tugged on his pant leg wanting to get up in his arms and be carried. Throughout the evening I had many moments to myself where I reflected with the sound of the drum in my ear. Somehow, the stories of school became more alive as I shared in this evening of remembrance.

As the night progressed, Arnie took me to the front of the hall and showed me two framed pictures. They were of the man I was here to honor, Joseph Paul, his father-in-law. Arnie spoke with great reverence as he told me stories of the past and explained the kind of man he had come to know. He told the stories as he showed me a picture of Joseph Paul in his traditional regalia. He talked of his father-in-law's great respect for culture and his role as a leader of his people. I saw in this picture a man that has many stories. The picture is a portrait from the side, and is filled with colors from the outfit that was designed for him. A cigarette gently rests on his lips.

The second photograph is an old black and white. In the picture, passed down to remember, a little baby rests in the arms of a family of three sitting in the grass with a tepee proudly raised in the background. The mother holds the baby in a tightly wrapped leather bundle. The family sits cross-legged. No one smiles in the picture. I wonder who took this picture on this day and what the people were talking about. Arnie tells me that

this was Joseph when he was young and that this is how life was back then. These photographs helped me understand a little more about what this day was all about.

I was here to reconnect with this family and to honor their request to attend this event before I began conversations with their daughter about her school stories. The protocol was different than what is typical, and far different than the way I have heard other school stories. However, I knew that I must follow the lead and do what Arnie asked me; it was the right way. As I think about the many stories that Skye and I shared while we were in school, I see now that we never reached the deeper layered stories during our time together. I am only now realizing that I did not see all her gifts.

On this Friday night I watched Skye show me many layers, those that were not visible within the larger high school setting. I wonder why she was unable to present this side of her story. I wonder if I was truly listening. I watched Skye differently this evening as she took her nieces and nephews by the hand and showed them how to dance, the real way, the right way, always hand in hand.

What it Means to Dance ... Moving Away and Then Coming Back Home

As I sat with her family on this special evening, we shared thoughts and stories of the past. Skye spoke of the different ways in a big city. She said that it was different than where she came from. She talked about reserves that are close to the city and how they can change people. She shared a story about some boys from the nearby reserve who also attended the same high school as she had.

She talked of the past and changed her expression as she spoke. She said that these boys would make fun of her for holding hands during a round dance and for participating in cultural ceremonies. She told me this story for the first time on this evening. She said they laughed about this and said it was stupid. As time went on, she told me, she quit talking about it, and eventually quit doing it. She put her outfits away.

Her story amazed me. She said to me, “life changes you in the city” and that she should have “never quit dancing ... but Lessard I will get back to it. I am getting a new outfit made.” When I think of the time spent and all the conversations with her that I have had, I think of this story and how she held onto it. I wondered why she waited until now to tell me. I wondered what other stories I didn’t get to know.

As the night continued, I often sat alone thinking about how this occasion was beautiful. It was powerful to see families coming together and sharing in the dances and the song. I thought this must be the way the Creator meant for things to be where families shared together. It was real and intimate. At this dance there were no alternative substances to help me or anyone else feel good and to mask our emotions. The drums kept beating and the voices kept changing as new singers entered the circle. The songs were played for many different reasons. The songs were played to honor Joseph Paul. Singers came from many Nations and travelled great distances to sing a song for this man. During this evening there was no competition, just people coming together to remember.

I listened closely to the many honor songs, and I helped throughout the evening by bringing the drummers water and by serving the lunch to the Elders. Later in the

evening, Skye and her mom took me by the hand and told me “Come on, Lessard, come and dance with us.” I reluctantly and nervously entered the circle and followed their lead as they helped me to remember.

I danced many times throughout that evening and listened up close with Skye as she provided the back up vocals for her father’s honor song. I remember it this way. As we gathered around the circle I watched and the family joined Arnie as he sang, holding his grandson in one arm and beating the drum with the other. He never missed a beat, he was leading for his family in a real good way.

Three Sisters

I had arranged to meet with Skye in her new city which required a road trip. The drive was a peaceful 3-hour journey that helped me to focus my thoughts on the conversational relationship. I had never really come to know Skye’s early school stories, and I was eager to learn more about the past. I wondered how our previous relationship would impact the way the conversation would flow. I wondered if I would be able to use the tape recorder to help record the stories or would this fit into the way we talked. These are the questions that continued to cross my mind as I made my way down the highway, anticipating our future conversation.

I had many thoughts about her high school stories based on how I was situated within them as a teacher. However, the high school stories were only a small part of her stories. I needed to find out about the Skye that I didn’t know. I needed to have conversations that looked at her life differently than the way that I knew. I had to

reimagine what life was like for her in a different place than the one that I had come to know.

I met Skye at a local shopping mall. Her new job involved working the night shift so she came to our meeting place with no sleep. The interesting part of Skye, as I am getting to know her in a different way, is that very few things are done individually. A conversation sometimes means a conversation with the people she chooses to bring along. I had anticipated meeting Skye for roughly an hour and I assumed wrongly that it would be a simple exercise of visiting, catching up on the past and talking about school as we shared. The picture in my mind that I had was much different than the picture we created. Skye's two sisters also wanted to visit and with them came her little nephew who was also a part of this family conversation. At first I was nervous because it was not how I thought it would be but as we moved forward with the conversation, the sisters created a story for me that helped me understand.

The setting was a busy food court and it initially felt like I was in a job interview as I looked across the table and the oldest sister, Skye, and her youngest sister prepared to answer my questions about school. I started off with questions about school places. To me it felt like a panel with the three sisters answering questions and debating times, facts, and locations. The girls would often help each other remembering the schools of the past and the stories that took place within them.

Skye told her story of school as involving movement between her reserve and an urban centre. Her story of school started with a city school in kindergarten and then back to the reserve for Grade 1. Her memories of school and place are vague. She did not

remember specific school names, or places. She could only tell me whether or not she was at the reserve or in the city. Her story of early elementary involved moving between the city and the reserve until Grade 3. From Grade 3 until Grade 7 she spent time at the reserve school. The family relocated to a different reserve school for Grades 8 and 9. The story of school and movement resonated with me. We carefully charted a time line that the sisters helped me to develop. The school names or the names of teachers were not looked at as important details to consider. The girls could not remember specific names; they only remembered the stories that took place during these times. The story of school involved change and adaptability based on job opportunities for the family, reserve housing lists, and personal tragedy.

The stories of school began to appear and, with them, some of the sadness that rests with them. The girls' stories of school and their recollections of school are varied. Despite the great diversity and vantage points shared, the sisters all remembered their lack of photographs and the few school book memories that they had. The story the sisters shared with me is about a Christmas that they missed when their house burned down. The family lost everything on Christmas Eve and they remembered the dates and memories of it. The girls told me that they remember it at every Christmas and that there was something wrong with the furnace causing a fire. Their lives were interrupted and the evidence of the past became lost. The photographs and cultural reminders were destroyed leading the family to another new location and another new school. The past has many stories that I did not know. The importance of photographs in their current lives becomes

more evident to me. The photographs of their grandfather are invaluable reminders of the past. I was beginning to understand more as I listened.

Teachings From Our Parents

The stories of school shifted back and forth from sports to the classroom and to the in-betweens. The story of place and learning from parents was evident in many of the stories shared that afternoon. The girls talked about learning differently and sticking up for each other in school. They talked about opportunities and how sports helped them out. They spoke of having next to nothing growing up and practicing golf on the dirt fields at the reserve, far removed from the places where I learned. The stories helped me to understand a part of their personal journeys.

The girls recalled times in the past when their mom and dad taught them sports, dancing, and culture. They laughed when they told stories and corrected each other along the way, sometimes disagreeing on the small details. As they told their stories, they moved backwards in time to the intergenerational connections they shared with their cultural roots. They told me they had been practicing and learning about culture and traditional dancing since they were babies. I now know by walking alongside them that their cultural roots come from a place. The passing down of knowledge through the act of participation is a thread that weaves throughout their lives. The cultural stories and knowledge started before them, and before their parents as they told me stories about their grandfather who was a gifted man. He was a song maker and singer. He was a very

spiritual person with special gifts. The girls spoke proudly of their grandmothers and grandfathers and how culture had always existed in their family.

“I Am the Luckiest Kid in the World”

For me, the words “I am the luckiest kid in the world” defined our conversation on this day. Skye and her sisters talked about times when things were not so good at school. A story that Skye told me takes her back to Grade seven at the reserve school where her dad was the school patrol officer. He found her smoking behind the school with some other girls. The sisters laughed as they shared this story with me. They told me that their mom at this time was a smoker but after that day she quit. She not only quit; she went into the school the next day and started an anti-tobacco group for the youths. Skye became the lead student. The girls laughed hard about this story and as they did, Skye interjected “I am the luckiest kid in the world! My parents care. A lot of people’s parents weren’t around, our parents were always around.” The sisters all agreed.

I asked Skye what brought her to the high school where I met her. She told me that her parents wanted a better opportunity for her, and that the conditions in the community school were challenging. The decision to move to the city and start at a new high school was hard, because it was so different than what she had become used to at the reserve.

I now asked Skye about her experience at the high school and her first days in class. I asked her if she could remember. She told me that there were a lot of nice teachers . The work was difficult. It was different than what she had seen before. She said

it was hard to do things by herself in a new city. She was used to having her parents around. During her time in the city she lived with her older brother and she had to learn to become responsible for her own school routine.

She also told me about some of her feelings coming from a new place and how she often felt low as a student. She explained to me an experience she had during one of the first days in class. The class went to a local driving range to play golf. She told me she was excited to attend because this was her favourite sport. However, she missed the school bus because she was not familiar with public transportation in this new city. She arrived late to the driving range but she still managed to walk there by herself. When she arrived, the teacher stopped the class and told everybody to “look at who is late.” He then asked her where she was. She replied, “I am not a city person, I got lost.” He laughed and said, “Are you sure about that? Are you sure you didn’t get lost at the mall?” She told me, “And then, with everyone looking at me, they started to laugh.”

Skye did not remember too many stories from high school but this story stayed with her long after. She said, “I felt like quitting right there and going home. But then he would have been right about me.” She said that day when she was at the driving range, “I felt like he thought I was just another dumb Indian. But he changed his mind when he saw that I could golf.” She said, “I felt this way many times especially being a female native golfer. It is different, Lessard, because it’s not what people expect, they judge you before they see you play. If you are good you are all right. They don’t expect you to be good.” This was a story that I could relate to.

Her story of golf while in high school is one that she largely plays down. Skye became the first female Aboriginal golfer in the past 10 years to make the local school team. Skye changed the way golf was viewed and how she was viewed by those who worked with her. She became a two-time provincial medalist in golf and won many individual trophies for her performances in the province. Skye gained many positive accolades for her success in sports. However, as the sports coaches moved in and out of her life, between the seasons her academic performance began to slide. Many times in her Grade 10 year I personally advocated a shift in programming to encourage tracking of her performance and consistency in the teachers she worked with. I was told that programs cannot be adjusted after the school year has started, and that if we do this for one student then we have to do it for others. I could see from the outside what was happening. I felt that the Grade 10 core courses were critical points in her schooling and suggested strategies to provide a better chance at successful completion. I feared what could happen if she was removed from her peer group, and the few connections she was starting to develop.

The Grade 10 school year went by and Skye did not pass many of her core classes which required an adapted timetable in her Grade 11 year. The size of the school and the individual stories of students are difficult to locate on the school landscape. Schools are filled with many students' stories that are similar to Skye's. Skye began her Grade 11 school year in classes with many Grade 10 students and, as she did the previous year, she started the school year off positively, attending regularly and completing her assigned work.

It seems when I write this that each of Skye's school years had a rhythm. She started off the school year playing volleyball and staying connected to students and staff through the sports that she played, and the success she had within them. As the volleyball season ended, the first semester also came to an end, and she was on track in her courses. During the second semester, the year long classes often dragged and while no sports were being played, she struggled to maintain and would grow somewhat distant. The connections and relationships to people are what sustained Skye and other areas fit into them and around them based on the strength of the connection.

Skye worked hard through her Grade 11 year and managed to successfully complete many credits. Skye described her schooling the following way, "I didn't always understand my work and I am too shy to ask for help, I felt dumb." She told me often during our conversations that she struggled with the school work and it was different than what she had learned on the reserve; the pace was too fast. She told me, "Do you know that I am actually smart, Lessard? I was the class valedictorian in my Grade 9 class at the reserve." I replied by simply saying, "I know you are."

The Grade 12 school year started and Skye was not in attendance for the start of volleyball tryouts. Her Grade 12 year was a big year. Many of the girls asked each other where she was, or if they had heard from her over the summer. As far as I knew she should have been there. After the first week of school, and long after volleyball try outs, I recalled seeing Skye walk into the gym to tell me she was back. I walked over to greet her and her parents and I talked to them about their summer. I could sense that there was some uncertainty as to whether or not she would be coming to school in the city. I

wondered what had changed over the summer. I wondered why the shift in their feelings. I knew by talking to her parents that they were concerned about their daughter and wondered if it was a good decision to return to the city for this school year.

The start to the school year did not go as I expected. The one area that Skye remained devoted to was always her sports. She started off the season a step slower and less confident in her abilities on the court. The performance in sports was the most insignificant part that I cared about, but it did tell me that life was shifting for her. I knew when watching her that something was different. I also knew that things were changing because she came late to practice and missed games, without any communication. In the two previous years she had never missed a game. She even played when she had minor injuries. She loved sports and never missed them. Skye had fallen off her path. She was attending class irregularly but my biggest concern was her distance. I knew her and I knew how she responded to embarrassment. She pulled away, went inside herself and did not want to confront the difficulties that were taking place. I knew this was not what she wanted to do, or who she wanted to be but I could not reach her. I had lost her. She became silent and unwilling to have a conversation. She was hurting.

I remember the last time I saw her in the school setting. The volleyball team had a tournament and she missed the first game without telling anyone. The coach decided that he had to make a statement and he benched her for the next two games. I remember looking at her as she sat with her hands on her knees, staring at the floor. She did not talk to anyone that day. She was the best player on the team, one of the leaders, and I wondered where she had been. I wondered what happened to her. I remember talking to

her parents after the game, and telling them that I was concerned. I told them I was worried about a number of things. I told them all that I could and that I didn't know how to help her at this moment.

I can still see them walking out of the gym with their little girl. This was the last time I saw her in my role as a teacher. This was the last moment that we shared before she moved to another city and eventually left her school story. I am happy that she moved, and that she went home with her family, to find herself again. I think at times we all need to go home to find out who we are and where we are going. Sometimes we need help. I believe that Skye and I helped each other out often throughout our time together. I know that she helped me to get back to a way that is good for me, a cultural way. She helped me to remember who I was and what I was forgetting. I think I am just starting to help her now, by continuing to believe in her and her school story. I believe that she will go back someday and follow the dreams that she has. I think in some ways she has already started. I look forward to sitting down with her and reading her this story. I wonder what she will think. I wonder what she will change. I wonder when she and her family will help teach me the next steps in my "Dance Me Home" song. I am hoping that when I hear the drum and the voices singing in the background that I will continue to dance. I am hoping that I will be holding my little girl's hand teaching her the right way to dance, always in a circle, only in a circle.

A Narrative Account of Jules – Sean Lessard

Ball Cap and a Smile ...

I came to the city over 10 years ago. When I used to come visit, I used to drive to the outskirts of town and have friends come meet me and guide me through this new place. I came to the city to study at the university. I arrived with ideas of life based on the limited experiences of my past. I entered this urban space as a small town kid who grew up on a farm and only travelled to the city to visit the mall on family vacations. Over time I have grown to appreciate and learn new ways in this big city.

However, I am disappointed to say that my life in the city sometimes makes me forget about the simplest things. I sometimes forget familiar smells and sounds or the joy in watching the seasons change all around me. I think of all these different feelings as I consider this narrative and find a way to capture the feeling of a special place in time. I think of the simple pleasures when I consider the youth in this story and how they derived joy and freedom in what many people would consider less than ideal conditions. The kids in this community found multiple ways to create stories of happiness and, in turn, they continue to allow me to look inside-out and help me to try and remember the important things in life ... the simple and uncomplicated stories that are all around.

As I shift back in time I recall that the first few months in the big city were somewhat difficult. I was intimidated by the people and the pace. It was faster here. It was a busy way of life. I find meaning now as I look back in time and think about the past. I see that many of my current beliefs are situated in the past and nested within the stories of a community place. I continue to find myself drifting back to the downtown

spaces of a school. I am starting to remember my first days in this new place and various memories are surfacing.

I recall looking for a job when I first arrived in the city. I was looking for work with young people, the only job I had ever known. I picked up a large phone book, much bigger than I had ever seen, and started with the word "A" for Aboriginal. Through my search and various phone calls I managed to contact an organization who was looking for someone to work in a school with Aboriginal youth and families. I set up an interview and I was awarded the job and arranged a time where I could get familiar with the school. Little did I know that this school would become home for the next three years of my life. My daily routine would consist of going to university class in the morning and then making my way to my new place of work in the afternoon.

I still remember my first trip. I was holding a map in my hand and travelling on the train for the first time in my life. I made my way to the destination where I was supposed to exit but I didn't realize I was supposed to press the button to open the doors. I laugh at this memory now because it's raw ... it was me at this place in time. I was taking a journey to a community I knew nothing about. It was far removed from the privileged vantage point I had experienced. I had a different view of life ... a different lens to look at this place with. This place and the people within it taught me so much about who I am today. They brought me closer to home than I had ever been.

“Mustang Pride”

I finally arrived at that school and looked it up and down, it looked like a castle among the buildings that surrounded it. I looked at the playground, the sports field and the signs on the front of the door. I observed the markings on the building which displayed its age of existence and the message from the past which included separate entrances clearly marked for boys and girls. The signs pointed to a time in the past and a history that created a story of this place long ago. I wondered what kind of school this place was going to be. I wondered how much different this place would be than the schools that I had to come to know. I have many memories of this school and the early moments of our relationship together. The first steps in the school are the “get to know you.” I would decide at this time how I would feel about the place. I wondered what kind of relationship it would be. I wondered if it would feel welcoming. The only skills I could bring to this new job were my past experiences working with youth and the feeling I would get from a place. I was about to open the door and enter into this new job. I remember being excited and nervous. I pulled on the handle of the big wooden door, with the cement word “Boys” etched above me. I pulled on the door harder, but it was locked to the outside world. I wondered about that message and tried to understand. I had to be buzzed into the school through an intercom. I had to state what my role was within the school and who I was looking to visit. Now as I slide forward in time, I wonder what the parents feel when they have to ring the buzzer. I wonder if it makes it easier for people to not want to visit the school. I wonder only because I know what I was feeling on this first day. I know I was thinking about the negative. I was forming opinions and images

quickly in my mind about what this neighbourhood and community must be like. I was creating a picture before I even introduced myself.

After that first trip I always enjoyed the ride on the train. I would find sharp contrasts as I made my way over the river. I would start the trip alongside the trees and natural beauty and, as it progressed, the landscape would change drastically as I settled in the heart of the city. There was a different story in this place, one that was far removed from the spaces of the university classes. The community taught me a different way, one that operated on the values of listening and coming to know. It continues to teach me. I entered the school as a youth worker, not as a teacher, so my role was different. I was separate from the school conversations that were taking place. I relied on previous experiences and connected to the school community by volunteering to help out in coaching, and within the classroom spaces. I sensed in those first few weeks a reluctance and distrust as my job had seen many people come and go. The space to trust and share was difficult to negotiate during the beginning stages.

Each day I went out and supervised students during recess and took part in the many games being played. One day I would be jumping rope, the next day playing basketball. I was always participating and getting to know the students and their places. As time progressed the school staff began to talk to me and to ask me about my job. The conversational relationships began to emerge and I was slowly becoming a part of a different space ... part of a different community. The students at this school came from many areas of the world and had experiences that I could not fully understand. The school-life stories were sometimes very sad but were viewed with optimism by the

parents who had experienced a different reality in their home countries. The youths in this place taught me the basics through food, customs, and small greetings in their languages.

In working with the youths, I learned many lessons about place and particularly about how place and community are interwoven. Those of us who worked and lived in the place called “school” were connected through complex relationships with those who lived in the neighborhood. Students, of course, lived in both places. Sometimes those who lived in the school and those who lived in the community found ways to weave their lives through each other, creating patterns that seemed full of possibility for students,’ families’, and teachers’ lives. At other times they operated in isolation, seemingly to protect their familiar stories, the ones that worked for them. During my work I often negotiated ways in which I could understand where I fit into the multiplicity of these interwoven places on the landscape. I listened carefully to the stories that emerged.

My job at the school was to develop a mentorship program for Aboriginal students. I did not quite know how I was going to navigate this job at first so I relied on my previous experiences. I started an after school recreation program. The only “hitch” was that before we could play we had to do an hour of homework. I recognized that homework and reading were important areas to work on with the youths. I set up my work station at a small table in the library. I was surrounded by books in a peaceful place where we could begin our work.

In the first few weeks the youths attended sparsely, but as students came to know me they began to arrive. The mandate of my job was to work with Aboriginal students. I

quickly changed my mandate as students from all backgrounds began to enter that library and ask if they could do some homework so they could play in the gym later in the evening. I remember the many different students in various grades working together. The place was slowly becoming special.

In the old library is where I recall meeting a student named Jules. I have many memories of students in the past but Jules and her school story often entered my mind. I remember her and her friends, always arriving in a group, never by themselves. They started off very shy and reserved but, as time progressed, they began to open up and become more comfortable. Jules and her friends would often teach me little details about their south Asian culture. They shared food and told me about their traditions. They taught me as I tutored them in their subjects and, through the interactions, we began to take care of each other regardless of where we were from. We learned together by sitting at the table, sharing meals and reading about subjects far removed from the experiences of this place. I still look at this time and place with great fondness and stay connected to many of the young people I came to know at the library.

I think Jules said it best: "It's a great place to be. It's in the inner city and everything but you have to go there to see how the kids really are. When you live there for a long time you end up loving it. You love it ... I just think people should see for themselves, go to the area, go to the school." I think if I remember correctly we also called it "Mustang Pride," naming it after the school team name ... it was something we could hold onto regardless of where we all came from.

Creating Our Space For Freedom

I think about these times and the dynamics of the space. It was special. It was freedom and it was created not by me or the school ... it was created by the kids and passed on year to year. It became a storied place that the youth carefully protected. It was a haven from the outside worries. The kids looked forward to the time spent together. They told stories of the gym to new students wanting to participate. The idea of Mustang Pride took on a life of its own and, even though this took place long ago, they still remember. The young ones played with the older ones and ages did not matter. I remember the gymnasium housing between 40–50 students playing sports, reading books, dancing, and being free.

At one point in time I recall being brought to the office where my boss was waiting for me to discuss the students who were non-Aboriginal participating in activities. I remember trying to explain that I can't exclude kids from playing together and that it wasn't costing the company any money, only my time. I thought that it was great for our Aboriginal youth to be walking alongside the students that they go to school with in a different way ... a good way. This was an early tension that I had to navigate, it was based on policy. I wonder about policy and rules when we create spaces that divide or exclude? I wonder if the kids felt different in this space and how they would have reacted if I excluded a part of their school community? I learned from this tension, and the conversation with my company about only working with Aboriginal youths. I continued to open up the library and gym spaces and to work with the community who

came to the table. Many times my days were much longer than what I was getting paid for but who could really call this work?

Dreaming About the Past ...

I initially talked to Jules during her lunch break at a busy mall where she currently managed a retail store. We shared details about the past and the special moments we experienced at Rutherford Heights school. We talked initially about past friendships and the memorable teachers that taught her during that time in her life. Her reaction to my many questions and the ease in returning to this moment brought me back to the school, the gym, the library and all the places where I walked alongside Jules and her friends, trying to help them navigate school and life spaces. It seemed back then, as I think about it now, that the world and its choices and opportunities were all very available to us ... they were within reach. We dreamed about the future often together. I remember talking about traveling and seeing the world. The idea of going to university or college was a regular conversation that took place. I explained to Jules during our conversation that I wanted to hear her stories of school and that I thought they were important. I wanted to share her school experiences and the story of community. I told her that I would like people who read her story to see the many layers that young people have to navigate to complete their high school credits. I explained that I would like to share the story of “Mustang Pride” and how it can be created and how it can become lost in the school-life story that exists. As I write this I begin to wonder what makes kids stop seeing their dreams. I wonder what makes them less hopeful about the future. I wonder if Jules

continues to dream in the same way she once did. I am hoping that she continues to dream.

Earliest Memories of School

As we sipped on coffee Jules explained to me that she had many positive memories of school. She recalled her early school stories and how she moved to a part of the city that was different than what she had experienced. She spoke of Grade 1 at this school and how she could remember her family moving to this new part of town. She could remember Grade 1 and her classroom. She even remembered specific details about the teacher and the classroom space. Jules explained to me in this moment what it was like being different from the other students. She told me a story about her lunch and the fact that she ate foods that many kids had not seen before. Her mom was an excellent cook and would pack traditional Asian food for her lunch, and the kids would often say “eww, what is that ... it’s gross and they would make fun and laugh.” Jules said that she did not blame the kids. It was just that they had never seen this type of food so that was probably why they made fun of her. Sitting with Jules at the mall takes me back and it reminds me of her when she was much younger. She remains the same humble and quiet girl that I played sports with on the school field. Back then she would rarely say a bad word about people or be in a confrontation. She would never blame people and often try to find the good in situations. It seems to me that she has not changed.

“I Remember Being Different”

Jules continued to share stories about the school in a different neighbourhood with different kids. She told a story about a teacher and a set of crayons. She remembered the special pack of crayons that her mom saved up to buy for her. She explained to me the teacher was missing a set of 64 Crayolas. It was a special pack with many colors.

I had a set that my mom had bought for me. The teacher told all the kids to take everything out of their desks and to empty them on the floor. I emptied my desk and the teacher noticed that I had a 64 pack. She came up to me and raised her voice, saying to me that I stole them. She took me out of my desk by the arm and moved me out of the way and turned my desk upside down, emptying everything on the floor. I remember this teacher and I remember that I just wanted my crayons back that my mom bought for me with her money. I did not steal them but she took them from me anyways. I didn't like that school.

After that year Jules told me that she moved to the “inner city.” She said, “You remember where I live Sean, my mom still lives there, that is where we moved to.” She continued to explain, “I attended the same school from Grade 2 to Grade 9 ... it was right around the corner from my house.” When I reflect on Jules's stories I go back to the old neighbourhood in my mind. It feels right. It reminds me of a simpler time and the beauty and freedom of youth. I suppose I remember it based on where I was in my life but I feel like there was something different going on at that place at that time. It was different. I just didn't realize it. I had no experience to compare it with until now. It would be

difficult to recreate that magic but I can still see it as Jules reminds me of the past through her many stories of school.

Jules talked often about the old days at Rutherford Heights and how it was a supportive environment filled with activities. She talked about the principal and the teachers with great respect and I could tell by her ease in telling the stories that they are not that far removed from her memories. She told me that she still sees the teachers in the mall or when she goes home to visit her mom in that same house that she grew up in. She also told me that she still visits and maintains friendships with many of the students that she went to school with during this time. She recalled fondly, and spoke proudly of, her early beginnings in school, telling many good stories and laughing about the games we used to play.

I am thinking of the many stories and memories in this community. I slide back in time and can still see the many banners hanging from the rafters in the gym and the stage at the front for all to see. I remember the music playing as we put our books to the side, safely resting them underneath the benches. Many of the youth started on stage and listened to the music, dancing in their own way to the beats that created this freedom space. The girls, Jules among them, practiced moves they no doubt had seen on television. They mixed the traditional dances with the sounds and songs of contemporary artists. I remember there was always laughing and freedom to move. The kids loved this time where the gym was their domain and space to play. Many of us non-dancers would set up the floor hockey nets and divide teams, playing a mock Stanley Cup championship well past supper time and into the early evening. We played in the gym three to four

times per week and each evening we played for many hours developing our “Mustang Pride” and creating a space that slowly began to include the individual stories of the youth.

As Jules continued to remind me of the past she recalled a story of a “real fun” class that she was in during Grade 7 and 8 and how they were notorious for their laughter. I remembered this class and working with the various students. Jules recited many names of students that I can picture and she spoke of one student in particular. He had a minor speech impediment and oversized glasses. She told me that he was different than the other kids but in our “real fun” class “we loved him.”

He was our friend and I still keep in contact with him after all these years. I remember how we used to be so tight in this class. We would get detention for giggling through classes, and then we would giggle through detention. We were good students and just liked being around each other so it wasn't really a punishment to go to detention. I laughed when she told me this story because I remembered the voices of the teachers and how they wondered what they might do with this group of students who didn't take class seriously.

Jules shifted her thoughts of that class and began to talk about the community outside of school. She said she never worried about the neighbourhood and that, as friends, they often stuck together and looked out for one another. She explained,

I think people only say it's bad because there is a lot of homeless people and people with addiction problems. It's not like that every day ... like people say or what they hear. They are saying these things from where they are coming from ...

or where they came from. Where we live it is fine. People should just go around and see.

She told me that many of the students that I worked with from this time period did not make it through school. Many of them left when they went to high school. She also reminded me that many left much more than high school. Jules began to recall names and stories of students that have passed on. She told me stories that I had not heard. She said that the inner city has a way about it, and that you hear things about the people you know. “Information passes it’s way down to you, even when you haven’t seen the person for a long time.”

Leaving a Life Behind ... Starting New

Many people passed by as we sat on the park bench and continued to share stories of the past. Our conversation on that afternoon centered on the old neighbourhood and on the stories of growing up. I asked about the traditions of her family and wanted to hear the story of Jules’s mom. I had known her mom for many years but my conversations were often limited due to the language barrier that existed between us. Her mom often relied on the traditional language so it made it difficult to communicate. I wanted to hear the stories of her mom because I knew she was an important piece of Jules’s life, and I also remembered the tough stories that her mom faced raising her family in an unfamiliar place.

I started off by asking Jules how her mom liked being a grandma and she told me that she helped so much with her little daughter. Jules told me that her relationship with

her mom has changed because of her daughter and the role that she is now playing in her life. I asked Jules about her mom and when she first came to Canada. She explained to me that her mom was finally getting to go back this year to her home country. She left because of the war to give her family a “new start.” She told me, “my mom has not seen her mom since she was 12 years old. I have only seen pictures of my grandma and talked to her on the phone. I don’t know what she is like.” This story really stayed with me, and it helped me to understand another side of this family story. I didn’t recall hearing this story. I wondered how many other stories I missed. I wondered how schools could come to understand and learn from these protected stories.

Jules continued to tell me about her mom and other family members, some of whom I knew. She talked about her three brothers and how she always looked up to her oldest brother, and how he used to teach her to play sports at a young age. She remembered watching him play sports when she was in elementary, and she remembered feeling “crushed when he moved to a new city to attend university.”

Jules had many feelings about her family and, in particular, her one brother who was two years older. He had difficulties in life and spent time in and out of detention centres. She spoke of her brother with some anxiety because she felt he should have cared more for her when she was growing up. She explained that she had a difficult time due to the way he treated her. She explained that after my two oldest brothers moved out to go to college, “It was just me and my one brother at home. He was often in charge of the family and felt like he was the man of the house.” There were many stories Jules shared with me and it is a piece of the family puzzle that she continued to struggle with.

She reminded me that she had multiple jobs in Grade 9. When she was paid she gave money to her mom, stepdad and her brother. At the end of it “I would have a little money for myself...just you know to help out around the house.” Her frustrations increased because each time she worked and received pay her brother would reappear in her life and “keep track of her payments.” She told me he would say to her, “ ‘I want my money.’ I’m like no; I have nothing. He would say that I was lying ... ‘You just got paid today.’” He took most of her money on pay days and left a small amount each time for her. She said “I was bullied you know, like ... ” As Jules told me this story, I saw the complexity and recognized the importance of the gym and the library and all the spaces that we co-created with the other kids from the neighbourhood. We found a haven from the other parts of life that are difficult to understand and cope with.

I asked her about her oldest brother and if life was different when he was home. She explained to me through a small story.

My oldest brother was the best ... he always took care of me and would talk to me on the phone when it was difficult. I remember he used to put money in my purple piggy bank that I had since I was a kid. I used to get change and bills and put them in there to save ... I think I got close to one hundred dollars in change. I saved for over a year straight. I came home from school one day and the head of my piggy bank was cut off and my one brother had taken all my money. If my oldest brother was home this would have never happened. He is the one I always ran to when something bad happened.

As she told the story I could see that her oldest brother was similar to the gym space, a haven from the difficult times and someone to communicate with when life proved too difficult. Jules never spoke badly about her family or her brother that had taken her money. She was frustrated telling the story but with more sadness than anger. She said that regarding her oldest brother that “it was the saddest day for me in my life because he was the only one there for me and I felt like when he left that I had no one. It was like no one would be home.”

Balancing Tradition – “It is a Balance Trying to Find My Identity”

I shifted the conversation from family and asked questions about traditions. I wanted to inquire into the past and her family’s relation to it. Jules told me that she still goes to the temple occasionally for cultural celebrations. She said that this part of her life was still important but there were many times in the past where she would get frustrated with her culture, the traditions, and the expectations from the community. She reminded me of the time when she had a boyfriend in school who was from a different culture. “It became difficult to handle because many people in my community would talk about it ... they felt like I was being a bad influence on the other girls. They talked about me and it hurt because it is just what they heard.” Jules told me many stories of the balance that she tried to maintain and that she was constantly trying to please her mom and her traditions but that she also wanted to experience life in her own way.

I used to get so frustrated with my mom I would tell her, “I am your daughter, please say something ... stick up for me.” You see, in our culture it’s about being

proper ... girls don't do this, girls don't do that, girls stay home and cook and clean. I was supposed to be one of those girls but I wasn't ... they thought really bad if I did things differently. People judged me and they didn't even know me.

As Jules told me her story of culture and identity I began to wonder if this was why she felt like she needed to try a new school and a new beginning. Was this one of the reasons why she moved away from her friends and went to a different high school after junior high?

Jules explained to me that at the end of her Grade 9 school year she felt an increasing level of stress. She said,

I would tell my mom I am not rushing into marrying or a relationship. I don't always want to cook, clean and do everything a woman has to do in my culture. I don't want to be set up with someone and arranged ... I don't want to be with someone that I don't care for or love. I told her that I won't go through with it.

Jules talked of the tension between her and her mother and how it led to many arguments about the "old ways" and traditions. Her life story had many layers and it impacted her school rhythm. However, it seemed that Jules found a way to navigate each part of her life. She must have constantly balanced the cultural narratives, her family stories and school stories, keeping them somewhat separate and navigating them when they intersected. Her stories on the school landscape included the cultural traditions but, as time passed, the challenges and expectations became more difficult.

Travelling to High School –Trying to Negotiate an Unfamiliar Landscape

“I would like to be an astronaut ... I would like to go to space”

Jules began to share her experiences in high school. She said that she wanted to “get away” from the inner city and start a “new life.” She decided to enroll in a school that was across the city and away from the friendships that she had developed in the past. She said, “To get to school I used to get up at 6:00 a.m. and be on the bus by 7:00 a.m.” She told me about the daily routine and path she took and that she rode the bus for an hour every day. “I wanted to get out of the inner-city so I went to Lincoln High ... I didn’t have any friends there ... I just kept to myself.”

Jules reminded me that I was also at the school at this time in my new role as a teacher, and that it seemed like a great idea to go to Lincoln High because it had many options. It was different. She talked about the first days in high school and all the nervousness that came with it. She also remembered the “try-outs” for the volleyball team. Jules had previously played all sports in junior high and was a dominant athlete at that level. However, she entered a new landscape where many athletes played year round and attended elite sport camps throughout the summer. The new landscape was different than the opportunities that she had experienced in her school-life story. She said, “I went to the first day of ‘try-outs’ but I was just scared ... it was a new school ... a new year ... I just stopped. I used to play every sport in junior high but this was different.” It was a different kind of place, a place that was difficult to negotiate and feel comfortable within. I wonder how kids can experience such different stories in a city and school system that

is relatively small. I wonder what other stories of difference exist for kids in this school-life system.

Through the stories of sports and this initial fear of trying out for a sport that Jules had previously enjoyed success in, I began to see the challenges that she faced. Jules told me that she walked “15 to 20 minutes past the police station to the bus stop, and that some mornings it was real cold to be walking.” Her routine and challenges in school magnified as the snow began to fall and the weather posed another barrier. Despite the difficult circumstances Jules continued to attend classes and to try to navigate her way through this new school place. As the school year progressed she met some friends and began to meet them at a bus stop on the way to school each day.

I remember meeting some kids that were also going to Lincoln High...I guess you could call them skater kids. They were the ones that us shy kids get along with ... they don't judge us. I liked talking to the one girl and we became friends. I noticed sometimes that she and her friends didn't attend classes. I tried doing this also ... and stayed away from a class from time to time because I liked having some friends, someone to hang out with. The one friend I met stopped coming to school, she missed more and more ... it felt like there was no one there. I got lonely again. I didn't have anyone to see so I started staying home more. I used to live for the sports and activities and then I liked going to school to be with a friend. I tried and tried to go back and back but there was something there ... no motivation to go.

I talked to her in this moment of sharing about a story she told near the beginning of our conversations together. I asked her if she remembered telling me the story about her in Grade 4 when the teacher asked what she wanted to be. She had told the teacher on that day that she “wanted to be an astronaut.” I am thinking about the power in this statement and how kids at a young age seldom see the barriers that exist. She had a dream and a vision that included school but, as the landscape changed drastically, it was as if the dreams became dampened or forgotten. I wonder what it is about the transition from junior high to high school that makes it so difficult. I wonder how many students feel similar to Jules and reach out in loneliness to find where they are located on the high school landscape. I wonder what I can do differently as a high school teacher in this space.

Jules continued to tell me stories of high school.

I guess I just got lazy eventually, I just started to give up and lost my motivation for going. I think I began losing school because of the distance from where I lived, it sure made it difficult. I would get up and it was always real cold in the house and I was tired and quit looking forward to going to school. I started getting behind in classes and didn’t know anyone, eventually I just stayed at home.

Jules and I met four times for conversations. Each time we met we discussed a wide variety of topics but we often went back to the stories of family. Jules is currently managing a retail outlet and is the proud mother of a two year old daughter. I appreciate the stories that Jules shared with me and the way she continues to teach me. She spoke of

her daughter often in her stories. I asked her about what it meant to not graduate ... if it impacted her life in the present? She explained to me,

School has never left my mind or my heart, it is just that I have more responsibilities I have to worry about. Everybody has different reasons when they leave school. I think I would get a GED but I really want the real thing ... the real deal to get a diploma someday.

We continued this conversation about the past and I asked her how she felt about the term “dropout” when referring to her school story. She simply replied, “I don’t view myself this way at all. If you dropped out ... it is more like you don’t go to school ... you don’t do nothing for yourself ... you don’t work ... you don’t have nothing going for yourself. I still have something going for myself.” When she explained this to me, and where she is located regarding labels, I can see the complexity and the many stories of school and life that exist for youths. I am troubled by the definitions. I do not see a “dropout” when I look at Jules. I look back in my memories and see the young kid in the school places who had many thoughts on life and dreams for the future. Perhaps her dreams may have shifted but I believe as she tells me about her daughter that she is imagining a different story for her when she goes to school.

I want her to finish school regardless of anything. If she says to me one day I don’t want to go to school no more, I’d want to know why. I would sit down and ask her why, what’s going on ... what’s wrong. I think every parent’s dream is to see their kids finish school. I will help her because I think school is important. I used to be a good student ... I used to be a very good athlete. Do you remember?

I nodded in agreement as she told me this story. Our relationship is much different now than what it was when I saw her in the school and community places. Life moved both of us in different directions but it was good to be sitting on the park bench and sharing stories of the past on that day.

“Candle Light Stories”

Jules told me at the beginning of our conversations together a story about school and the stories that I didn't know as a teacher and community support who worked with families. Despite the fact I spent time with Jules anywhere from 4 to 5 days a week, there were stories that I did not consider or become aware of until now. Jules worked hard in school and was well thought of by teachers and students. I recalled when she told me this story the tensions that would exist between home and school when it came to Jules being on time in the morning for class. Jules explained it to me in the following way.

Did you know that many times I would go to sleep by myself with nothing but a candle for light ... sometimes there were days when the power would get cut off. I told her (mom) you need to stop. We don't have money for anything, how about groceries, how about lunch or school and stuff. And we wouldn't have any money ... spent all your money and we're left with nothing. And I began to cry.

Jules had many stories and she created a cover story for many years, remaining in silence to protect the story that was being played out on her landscape. I wonder how school and community can come together to share stories when life gets difficult for kids. I wonder what other stories Jules didn't share and why she chose to tell me this one now.

As Jules told me this story I remember the feeling in my stomach and the feelings that came to me. I worked and shared many moments with Jules in my capacity as a youth worker, but I did not realize that she was living out this story.

Despite a very strong connection to Jules, I did not see this part of her story. I wonder why schools don't provide marks for survival. I wonder what I would have done in a similar situation. What decisions would I make regarding school? Would it still be an important place for me? Jules negotiated the many challenges in her life with a smile on her face and a gentle demeanour. She participated in sports at the highest level and represented both the boys' and girls' teams in multiple sports. I can still see her in my mind on the school grounds that were surrounded by many buildings at the centre of the city landscape. We chased the soccer balls and baseballs that soared over the wire fence and bounced across the busy street that lined our field. I remember growing up in this space as a youth worker and spending time with some amazing kids like Jules who were oblivious to the troubles that surrounded the fields that we played in. I remember as I reflect on this story of school and hope to continue to get back to this good place in my teaching practice and reignite my "Mustang Pride."

A Narrative Account of Leanne – Sean Lessard

A point guard in the game of basketball is an important position; some would even call it the voice of the coach on the floor, or a player coach. The point guard's role is vital because the person who plays this position is responsible for running the offence. They call out the plays and distribute the ball to formulate a good scoring opportunity. The point guard is also a player that must be able to handle pressure. This special player handles the ball more than any player on the court, surveying the basketball landscape and trying to make the best decision to contribute to team success.

As I write this, I am thinking of a poster that hangs on the walls of a large urban high school in central Alberta. The poster is of a female student athlete who starred in this high school as a point guard for the basketball team. She led them to a city championship and three straight trips to the provincial tournament, an impressive resume for any high school player in any sport. The poster is fresh in my mind because I looked at it often as I walked down the hallway of this high school, first as a teacher and recently as a project associate at the local university.

The picture is of a female athlete dribbling a basketball with two other players trying to intercept her eventual path to the basket. A look of fierce competition is etched across her face and an inner drive emerges from the simple snap shot made into a poster for all to see. As I think of this poster and reflect on her story, my story, and our conversations about school I have many thoughts and questions that remain unanswered. In the span of a 3-month time period I have had numerous conversations with the girl pictured on that basketball poster. I will call her Leanne. Through our shared stories I

have learned a great deal about myself and my role as a teacher and future leader in education. I am deeply honoured to be telling this point guard story.

Point Guard Stories – Tuesday, January 20, 2009

I am excited about the phone call I received earlier today. I had a message from Leanne, a student I once knew. We were in contact because I wanted to ask her about being a participant in a project I was working on at the local university. As a teacher at a local high school I often sat on the sidelines watching, and cheering on our teams and supporting the individual students I knew through hallway conversations and teaching moments.

Leanne had an electric way of being and by this I mean she had presence. She was extremely popular with both teachers and students and, when playing her sports, she brought a flair for the dramatic. The way she described playing her sports is “being free” and I observed her play many sports in this way. The way that I remembered Leanne is through her gifts in sports, academics, and her ability to connect with people. She was filled with confidence and competed at a high level in her pursuit of school and life success.

Her days at school could be described as busy, rarely would I see her without someone tagging along; most everyone was eager to hear her stories. I can still picture her walking through the hallway and running down the basketball floor. She would take it to the hoop with no sense of fear, an open path and expected reality that she would succeed in these games, both life and basketball.

My view of Leanne comes from a place and a certain way of viewing the world. Sometimes people only look at one way of knowing and being. When they do this, they do not see the sideways stories that are emerging. The sideways stories I am writing about were always right there but perhaps they weren't the stories that we wanted to hear. I wonder if we, as teachers and coaches, had a hand in shaping who we thought she should be. I wonder what would have happened if we had asked her what her other interests were. What did she like beyond sports? I am only now just getting to know.

The way I viewed her story was narrow and one that was dominated by the successful student athlete and the model student. This was an easy story to see and hear. But as I entered a conversation and looked backwards and forwards through the memories and shared stories, it became evident that this was not the only story. I tell this story with one part regret because I failed to ask questions and to listen, to really listen. I failed to disrupt the tendency to watch from the sidelines and intervene when the path of schooling became difficult for her to navigate. I was silenced by inaction, wishing that I would have been more vocal in her school story. I wonder if I had taken action and asked different questions if it would have changed her stories.

A Different Story to Live By

I knew Leanne through the paths of two strong women in her life, her sister who I taught and her mother who I came to know through the teaching stories and through watching moments when I supported the team. Without looking at her family and particularly the influence of the female presence in her life, this story seems incomplete.

The sisters in this family are similar in appearance. They are two of eight family members. They are similar in many ways but sharp contrasts appear as I listened and observed their ways of knowing and doing.

Leanne's older sister, as I remember, was extremely focused in both life and school. She was a student and a person who had a very clear path in her mind spiritually and vocationally. I remember our conversations in the classroom, and hearing stories of a young man in another province that she intended to marry at the completion of her Grade 12 year. My initial thoughts were of young love and relationships. However, as I listened to her throughout the year, I began to understand that this was her intended purpose and, as she said, she did. I wonder if I really ever got to know Leanne without the stories and expectations of her sister and family. I wonder if other teachers felt the same. I wonder if it was with this view that we looked at her actions and created a wall of expectations not allowing room for growth and the freedoms that she wanted to experience. The way I see it, and I debate in my mind often, sometimes wondering out loud and sometimes in silence, how could we not see that she struggled with her path. Perhaps I was hoping that this different story would stay away or move on, and not impact the success rhythm that was being played out in the classroom and on the basketball court. Why did I only want to hear the basketball stories? With these thoughts on my mind, I entered a conversational relationship with Leanne, and a chance to reconnect with the past and to hear her school stories.

Reconnecting (Moving Backwards...Stopping in the Present...Imagining the Future)

I met a former student shopping one day and we briefly shared memories of the past. We talked about life in school and outside of school and how fast time goes by. I asked about many of his friends and I specifically asked if he ever crossed paths with Leanne. He told me that he saw her often and that he would tell her that I said “hi.” He told me that I should just contact her and that she would be happy to hear from me. I took a chance and reached out into cyberspace with a note in the form of an email. I was hoping for a reply and didn’t know what she would think because of the time that had passed, and the new life stories that might make meeting a difficult arrangement to negotiate. To my surprise she replied a few days later with an email, and then a phone call setting up a time to meet at a local coffee shop. This coffee shop became a great place to reconnect with a former student and to talk about some of the memories of school days gone past.

Coffee Table Conversations (February 5, 2009, 3:30 p.m.)

The feelings I had about seeing Leanne ranged from eager anticipation to an awkward nervousness. I was thinking about how I could ask her to participate in a project that I was involved in at the university, how would I explain it. I thought that she would probably not have time or that she would think that this was so not “cool.” I was wondering what our meeting would be like. What would we talk about? All these fears soon left me as she appeared around the corner. As we saw each other we laughed, and we gave each other a big hug. I was glad to see her and happy that she was doing well. I

was mostly happy that she was safe. My initial anxiety was gone. I could not wait to tell her about the work I was doing at the university and that I was so excited about studying and learning. She could not believe that I was still in school after all these years. She said “I didn’t expect that from you, Lessard.”

We laughed often during that initial conversation, sitting at a little table sipping on coffee and talking about life. Perhaps the laughing was because of both of our nervousness or maybe it was just time to look at life and the different stories we have created through our paths and laugh. Sometimes it feels like this is all we can do. I sensed that she was uneasy talking to me at the very beginning, maybe because I was her old teacher and, as I have come to know, it is never “cool” to be sitting in public with your old teacher. As time passed in the flow of conversation, I explained the work that I was doing and the importance of asking young people about their school stories instead of forming opinions based on what adults think. After my explanation she signed the ethics paperwork to agree to participate and to share her school stories with me.

I was very careful, in these early beginnings of reconnection, to respect my role and how it might feel talking to an old teacher about leaving school, and the fact that I heard stories and speculation that no doubt added to her ambivalence. I often told her during the course of our first conversation that “what was said at the table stays at the table,” and with these few words she took me on a journey of learning that lasted over several cups of coffee, “straight black coffee no sugar, Lessard” is how she said it.

During our conversations one of the choices I made was to put the tape recorder away and jot down notes as we talked. I recalled the conversations through the notes and

diagrams I made during our conversations. One of the main points I often brought up was that I was not there to judge any past decisions made. I was no longer her teacher. When we talked we often started in the present and then wove our way backwards in time. We reconnected with what was new in life, and how everyone in her family circle was getting along. She talked about the future often and what she would like to do. She told me that she was inhibited by the stresses and responsibilities of life. She used the word “busy” often when talking about the present.

She had been working at a local retail store as a manager but her dream was to go to school to be a “hair dresser.” She said that this was one of the areas where not graduating hurt her opportunities. She reminded me that she was only two courses shy of graduating with only her social studies and English (pure) credits left to complete. I remembered that she had left school with approximately one month to go in the academic year. She also talked about how much she enjoyed working with kids, and that she had, in the past, worked at a local daycare. Her work with children brought her a great deal of joy and I could see this in the way that she told me this story. From this conversation, she began to share parts of her own family stories.

Family and Life – Difficult Paths to Negotiate

Leanne talked with fondness about her little brother, one of five brothers in her family. She spoke about their relationship and how “he used to cry when she would go to school.” She told me this story of her younger brother for a reason. It is related to some of

her feelings of school and her reasons for “taking a break from it” as she said. The stories of her family are through her words and the few memories I have of them.

As she shared her views of family she often spoke of choices and the need for her to follow her own path in life and make decisions. She explained to me with frustration, “Do you know Lessard, that I am not even supposed to hang out with my little brother, because I might be viewed as a bad influence on him?” When she shared these words with me, it was with a feeling of sadness. There was a sense of prolonged silences and a voice that had become lost in this family story. She said her little brother was much like her, and they shared a common desire for individual difference and freedom. I wonder if this difference is what ties them together. I wonder what stories of life and school she shared with her little brother as he continues to find his way.

The story shifted to her other family members and with these stories I found out much more about the paths woven and the conflicted worlds that proved very difficult to navigate. Our conversation took us to the past when we talked about her older sister and how I taught her. Leanne told me about her sister and her life in a different province. She talked about her visits there and the new story her sister was creating with a growing family. Leanne spoke about her sister and how her life was focused on getting married right after school, and that this was a different path than she imagined for herself, but very contrary to the story her parents imagined for her.

As Leanne talked about her sister I could see that through distance and time they had drifted apart. Leanne described this feeling and her relationship with her sister as “it is different now, when we talk on the phone, it is way different than what it was.”

However, within the same thought, she told me a different story with different words when she said, “when she left a part of me left and from that moment I had to build my own path. I believe in the Creator and I believe that there is a reason for everything and that he has a path for me but it is one that is different than what is expected of me.” These words of wisdom showed me a different side of Leanne that I had not known. I was listening to a person who had thought often about life and continued to reflect on her role and influence on the family. She has had to think deeply about what to do when her path conflicts with that of the family stories being lived out around her.

Leanne continued to create a picture for me through the sharing of stories. Because of her willingness to share, I also began to talk about the past. I spoke about trying to fit in and find my way in a different place with conservative parents. I told stories of growing up and being different than my siblings. We shared many stories during that afternoon, we also had many good laughs thinking of the memories that made up our pasts. I had never talked with Leanne about life and its challenges. I was getting to know her for the first time. There were many stories that I did not consider. There are many conversations that I do not have with students. Perhaps it is due to time limitations or boundaries. Maybe it’s because I forget to share the small stories of wisdom that could relate to a young person trying to find their way. I wonder what would happen if I opened up more spaces for conversation with students. I wonder what the reaction would be.

As I shared stories with Leanne I tried to take the pressure off her telling me too much, or inquiring too deeply into a subject that was filled with mixed emotions. I told a story about my dad, and we continued to laugh because it involved lessons learned the

hard way and the difficulties in talking to parents about life, rules, and structures. After I shared a story about my dad, she continued to tell me more stories of her family. Leanne told me about what it means to live with silences and the importance of being able to talk with your kids. She continued to explain to me that it was

awkward to talk to my dad, I don't know the last time we talked even though we live in the same house. We don't have conversations. He does not want to know or hear about my life. I just pay my rent and live my life.

She explained to me how she could sit at a kitchen table and they could be the only two people at the table and there would be complete silence. This story of the kitchen table formed a distinct image in my mind and I wondered what caused these silences, and how will I manage conversations as my little daughter continues to grow. I wondered if the school encouraged silences by creating a story of Leanne, without her voice. I am thinking of that kitchen table and the air of silence that surrounded that place. I am imagining all the stories that could have been shared.

The time and the conversation flowed. It had become so easy and comfortable to talk with this former student. She amazed me with her stories of life. I asked her how her mom is in relation to her school story and the new life Leanne was constructing for herself. She told me about her mom through stories of sharing, sports, and conflicting world views. Through the stories she explained to me, "My mom loves me, it's a different kind of love, she worries so much about me and she often cries when talking to me which impacts how much I want to tell her about my life, it's difficult." She shared stories of her mom when she was younger trying to figure her life out, and says that her

mom understands. “She has picked me up late at night when I needed her and didn’t get on me about it. She understands but worries too much about me.”

Our conversation always moved through the different realms of life. It moved backward through time, stopped at the present and moved to the future. I asked her about basketball, a question that I wanted to ask all along but was scared to ask because I didn’t want to focus on the past. Through this question the future became the focus. She told me that she has not played basketball for a long time. She said “life was too busy and 20 feels old.”

We talked about stress and how it’s important to take time for yourself. I told her that I don’t have much life advice, but I do know that people need to find time to do the things they love; it’s balancing. I then asked about her vision for the future, what, if anything, she can see. We laughed alongside each other many times through these stories that we shared about life. She told me that when she has kids in the future she doesn’t want them to hide. “They can talk to me about anything, I will teach them about control and responsibility and communicate with my kids always.” The importance of communication was a thread that wove its way throughout our conversation.

As our conversation came to a close, I brought out of my book bag a small narrative account that I had written about Leanne prior to our meeting. I wrote the narrative to help me remember; to help me form a clearer picture in my mind. I read the account of my memories of her as a basketball player and student at the high school. I wrote what I remembered about her and told her how happy I was that I could share some stories with her and reconnect after such a long period of time. After I read my story,

there was silence and quiet thoughts on both sides about times past, the present, and the uncertainties of the future. I told her, as we continued to have conversations, the stories will change and we will develop it together, co-construct school and life stories. At this time we both packed up our belongings and walked to the entrance of the coffee shop. Symbolic of our first meeting we decided that it was best to go separate ways. After all, I do realize the social stigma of walking in the mall with your old teacher, it's still not cool. Until next time, Leanne.

In-between Time (What Does Silence Mean?)

When I sat down at the computer days after my initial conversation with Leanne, numerous thoughts crossed my mind. I tried to capture the feelings that surfaced and the complexity of the school and life stories that existed. I wanted to discuss the text and my writing with Leanne, in order to get feedback on how I was hearing her story. However, I was met with silence. We initially set another time to meet but narrowly missed each other. I remembered waiting at the coffee shop long past the time that we were supposed to connect, wondering if these conversations were too difficult. Maybe they were too fresh in her mind to continue. I tried many times in the following weeks but, once again, I could not contact Leanne to confirm a date to meet. I left messages hoping that she was doing well, and wishing that she would call me back. I can still remember feeling as if opening the conversational relationship had somehow caused her to disconnect and to withdraw through avoidance, leaving a gap that I felt I needed to help heal. These were the thoughts that crossed my mind during these days of silence. I finally decided I should

just leave things alone, move on and let her be. Obviously this was too difficult of a conversation for her to navigate at this time in life.

A few days later all my previous thoughts were pushed to the side through a simple text message sent to my phone. I woke up to the buzzing of my cell phone and a new text message had arrived. It was from Leanne. She told me to get a hold of her, that there was a lot going on in her life and that this was why she had not returned my messages. She needed space. Life had thrown out a new set of challenges in her relationship with her boyfriend. She had lost her job as a manager at a local retail outlet. The message was clear and simple: "Let's get a coffee and talk."

It is funny how we sometimes think that we are offending people, that our messages are not getting through and we lose confidence with the conversational relationship we are engaged in. I had questioned if I opened up difficult areas, and whether or not I should leave her alone. The conversation was not the issue. The life challenges caused the conversations to take a secondary role. I was relieved and we set up our next appointment at the same coffee shop with two more large coffees between us as we entered a new phase of sharing.

Listening to Silent Spaces and the In-between Stories – Feb. 27 1:30 p.m.

As Leanne approached the table, the awkwardness of our initial meeting was gone. We greeted each other with a customary high five and a familiar laugh. She looked different. Her hair was dyed jet black. There was a good feeling as we sat with cups of coffee ready to begin where we left off many weeks earlier. Leanne explained to me at

the beginning of this conversation that she felt so bad about not getting back to me. She assured me that it was not my fault but that she had needed space because life had been very difficult in the past few weeks. She told of her struggles in her relationship and her job, which impacted her life. The stress caused her to recoil in silence, not wanting to see or hear from anyone. She tried to develop strength for the challenges that she faced. At this point in the conversation I decided the tape recorder would, once again, be put to the side. It remained tucked in my book bag away from this conversation. My job was to listen and be there in that moment with no distractions to inhibit her need to express confusing circumstances.

Once again stories of basketball enter my thoughts as I typed about this experience and the shared stories of school and life. In many ways it feels like I am returning to the basketball sidelines and that the story we are sharing is in the silences of a time-out where the coach is diagramming a play on the whiteboard, trying to get more out of the players as the game moves to its half way point. I can still see Leanne sitting on the bench and her eyes are fixed on the words of the coach. Silence prevails and careful reflection on how this game must be played is considered. I wonder, as I type this, if Leanne ever gets time to sit in silence and reflect, ponder, and act on the advice that is carefully detailed on that whiteboard. I often think of basketball as I consider Leanne's stories of school and how her stories of school are woven into her current life. The past experiences will always be in these present stories.

These images of basketball stay with me as I reflect on the second conversation. It moved around from topic to topic, ranging from stories of creation and the realm of

spirituality, to stories of identity and the challenges of young people in school trying to fit in to the social circles that exist. Leanne asked many questions during this afternoon of coffee and conversation. We continued to laugh often during the sharing of stories of growing up, and thought about the small lessons in the stories. I like to think we were learning from each other about what life was like in two different places and time periods; urban/rural, male/female but also how sports played significant roles in how we each viewed the world around us and tried to make meaning for ourselves.

The conversation moved in different directions, first starting at school and then flaring off in a new direction based on the challenges that life had created in the moment for Leanne. Once school and that part of the story was put to the side, life and its harsh realities set in, and pressures such as earning money, navigating jobs, and finding balance in a busy world became dominant threads. The conversation topics and tone were much different than the initial meeting. This conversation offered an opportunity to express and release frustrations. Perhaps this conversation was an attempt to assign meaning to what was going on around her. During this second conversation that lasted throughout the afternoon hours and numerous cups of coffee, I listened carefully and did my best to respect the words and the direction of the conversation based on what she needed. I thought as I listened the stories of school would eventually emerge.

Bad Things Happen to Good People

Many words and moments shared on this day help me in my thinking and my respect for her stories. Leanne's words on this day stayed with me long past the

conversation. They are still alive in my mind. I remember as she looked across the table and humbly asked,

Sean, what do you think? Do you believe that if you do good that good things will happen to you? Because, I don't feel this way. I think bad things happen to good people all the time. It just doesn't seem fair. What do you think?

All I could offer to Leanne on this day, was that "Yes I think bad things happen all around." I continued by saying, "It's sad that they impact the goodness in people who don't deserve it, but we need to try to find ways to create new stories and not let the bad ones become our only story." I did not want to offer old teacher advice and I wanted to stay away from the hallway clichés with which I sometimes met students. This conversation was beyond that old story and Leanne needed me to be something different on this day. What I now know from this conversation is that I don't always have to provide an answer. I simply needed to listen to the words and the silent spaces that surrounded that coffee place conversation.

Sharing Teachings from Another Place ...

Leanne talked about life and how she despised control but lately she had let life take control over her. She explained this to me through her love of sports and basketball and that her need to work dictated the amount she could play. Time constraints limited her freedom. Leanne expressed her love of freedom and described it by talking about going for a ride on a motorcycle and "just driving and letting my thoughts go." Leanne

talked of freedom and how she desired it but her choice of leaving school had dictated her current path, and the amount of choice that was available.

We talked about freedom for a long time on this day. I wondered how to respond to her and I found myself drawing a picture for her of a medicine wheel. This was a teaching that a Cree Elder had passed on to me. Although Leanne and I didn't share the same cultural path, we looked at the medicine wheel teachings and reflected on where we were situated within it. We drew this out together slowly and looked at each section of the medicine wheel. We looked at the importance of freedom, respect, balance, and how they developed over the life span. We looked at the medicine wheel and talked about the past, the present, and the future and how they are all connected and shape the paths that we are creating. Through this conversation, I asked Leanne about school and what school was like. Did she always love freedom? Was she always good at sports? These were questions that came to my mind as I asked her to write down on a piece of paper the names of her siblings and the schools that she attended.

Stories of School

She scrawled down the names of her family members from oldest to youngest, and told me little stories about them in the process. She also wrote out the schools that she attended. She pointed with her pen and tapped the paper, circling a school's name as she shared her junior high experience. She explained that this is where she felt the need to run opposite to what was going on. She did not always feel comfortable with the

teachings and directions of her classes. They were different than what she wanted. I wondered about what her picture of school would have looked like.

Leanne talked in great detail about her early school years and often described them as nothing out of the ordinary, “just a regular kid going to school.” Once again I wondered why she pointed out that junior high school experience and her memory of it. She explained to me that she attended a local kindergarten in her neighbourhood and then she went to a Christian school from Grades 1 to 9. Leanne told me the only thing she really remembered about the past was the sports stories. She reminded me that this was the time in her life when she first learned to play basketball.

She talked about this school of the past with feelings that are connected to how she is currently feeling. I tried to inquire into this space and asked her if she felt negatively about this school while she attended or just now as she reflects on it. She described her junior high experience and the students with whom she attended school in the following way, “It’s not like we were oppressed, or maybe we were ... (laughs). It’s just that we (students) didn’t have the experience of other kids, and many of us went counter to what we were always told to do, or told to act. We just went a little crazy when we were thrown into a big high school and given all these choices. We didn’t know how to manage this, it’s difficult going to high school.”

As I listened to Leanne on this day I wondered why it took so long for us to have this conversation. I have known her for many years and, through all this time, our conversations had been largely on the surface. I wondered if we would be able to have this conversation if we could go back in time. Does the school landscape inhibit the need

or the possibility to share? Is there something about that high school space that defines roles and makes it difficult to have a conversation that is needed? When I think of my role as a high school teacher I often forget about the critical development that takes place in elementary and junior high. My relationships with many students are often only sporadic interactions that take place in the hallway, changing only if I get an opportunity to connect through the classroom or extracurricular activities. These are the quick snapshots I see of many students. I only learn a small part of their stories in that high school place.

The conversation moved closer to the present and an area with which I was more familiar, the high school years. From the outside, it seemed Leanne had many positive experiences at this time in her life. I wondered if she felt the same way.

High school must be like a blur. It must be like that point guard story, a basketball game. How it's managed dictates success. The light bulbs on the score clock create numbers telling fans who is winning, and how much time is left in the game. The coach dictates to the players how the game will be played based on what is going on in that game during that moment, or whether the team is winning or losing. Success in this game is so narrowly defined and the choices made within can shape the outcome. What does a player do when the game doesn't turn out the way it was supposed to? How do you recreate the story that takes place on the court? What happens when a player makes a mistake? Is there opportunity for redemption or does the game move on? I think of school stories and not all of them have happy endings. Some students have skills to navigate. They have an ability to negotiate the changes in their story. I am thinking of the students

who don't always know the right answers, and desperately feel like they need to get away from that school place. I am thinking they are just not interested in playing the game at the moment but this does not mean they are not interested in the end result.

I wonder, as I type this, what Leanne will think when we read this account together. Does this analogy fit the story that she told me? Does it make sense to her as she reflects on her school story? I wonder what her new path will look like and if she will get back to playing the game she loves. What type of story will she create as she moves forward in time?

Many teachers knew Leanne quite well because of her presence in the hallway, involvement in sports, and high level of success in academics. However, she felt that she did not have a close relationship at school with her teachers. She said often during this part of the conversation that she felt that it was like "going through the motions, I can't really remember the classes at all or the teachers' names who taught me." She said that she really only "remembers the sports"; teachers "don't go that deep." When they talked to her they seemed only concerned about the subjects they taught.

We talked about the process of going through Grades 10 to 12 and Leanne told me that "there is so much more to me than what people think." She explained how she viewed herself as different than many of her teammates in school, that she loved to paint, and play guitar. She asked me if I remembered that. I replied yes and I recalled being surprised to see her board the bus with a guitar in hand, as we prepared for a weeklong school field trip. I wasn't shocked because I didn't think she could play guitar; it's just that she was the only member of the basketball team that went in her own direction.

Many of the players often stuck together in classes and did not venture that far away from the company of each other. Leanne reminded me during this conversation about how much grief she took from the other members of the team because she missed basketball games to attend the guitar field trip. This was an extremely unpopular choice in the eyes of her teammates. I wondered about the guitar story she was creating for herself and how it ran contrary to the dominant team story that existed in her life. I wondered if she still played the guitar and if she played to create her own individual story, one that was different than the collective.

Our conversation about high school often led to a discussion about the two courses she needed to complete her graduation requirements. She felt that she could easily challenge these tests if given another opportunity. She talked about the final year of school and how it shifted for her and that it became tense between her and her parents based on the decisions she was making. Leanne explained, “Lessard, I wanted freedom to date who I wanted to, and also to not have such strict rules telling me who I could hang out with.” She told me that she just wanted to be like the other girls and not have so many restrictions. She wanted to be her own person, different than what her family wanted. She reminded me of the series of events that led to her leaving school. She told me that in her Grade 12 year she met a man that she really liked but who was different than who her parents approved of. The differences led to tensions that were difficult to negotiate.

Leanne continued to tell me the story. She said, “I just could not take the pressure any more, I felt completely stressed out with the decisions that I had to make.” She described the extreme stress she was under, “I had no one to talk to that could

understand.” She said that at home there was stress about her choices but that she wasn’t doing anything that wrong; it was just different than what the expectation was. She said, “I couldn’t handle it, I needed to get away, and the stress at school and home was too difficult to handle. I needed to get away from life, from everything.” I asked her many questions during this part of the conversation and asked her if there was something different the school could have done.

Her response helps me to understand as I move forward as an educator. She said, “Lessard, even you, we just talked about the sports. You never asked me too much about the other things, everybody had a business attitude.” I looked at her and responded with a simple “I know, and I am sorry.” I told her how I looked at the story from one point of view, that I only ever saw her in the hallway, and that one day we were talking and the next day she was gone. “I had no way to track you down or ask if I could help.” We talked about this moment, reflecting on that school year. I told her how I felt about the situation and that I was shocked that she “dropped out” and she corrected me, “I didn’t drop out. I took a break. Dropping out is negative, it’s different.” We talked for a long time about her high school stories and she explained to me the importance of having someone to talk to in all parts of life. I wonder about the stories that we have shared and how the many avenues in her life had expectations and composed who she was or who she was expected to be. I wonder if her decision to take a break from school is a response to the numerous voices that were telling her who we wanted her to be.

At this moment Leanne went through the different areas in her life from her family, the church, and school and explained how often the “people don’t really want to

hear the truth, they want to hear things that make them feel good.” She explained that she is the first person in her family “to go on a different life path” and that it is difficult being by herself. She said to me the idea of a “lone wolf,” a title I gave her at the beginning of our conversations, is a good way of looking at her, because she is by herself in the decisions that she makes. She said “that there are so many people in the world that are not real...I have problems with people who make judgments and that cause me to want to remain silent.” As I look at our conversations, different feelings come to mind. I look at the roles of schools and most importantly my role as a teacher who can make a difference, and wonder how I will adapt. I wonder how I will learn from this story. I wonder when I return to the classroom if this story of school will change me, if it will help me to listen more closely to the stories that are taking place all around me.

I look at Leanne as the point guard of this story and I am thinking of her story often these days. I am thinking about how much her story is helping me as I continue to learn. I recently had an opportunity to step back on the basketball court with Leanne and some of her friends. She reminded me that I owed her a game for helping me out with my project. I am happy to write that since we started our conversations she has returned to the basketball court and has started to play again, returning to a game she loves but one that will not define who she is as a person. I played basketball with these former students for a good part of the evening and, as I slowly made my way up and down the court, I was laughing inside thinking of the small journey that we have been on and how time passes me by. I am thinking of all the good things and wondering and hoping that the happiness in a casual basketball game can be transferred to the other parts in life.

Thank you, Leanne, for teaching me!

CHAPTER 5. RESONANT NARRATIVE THREADS

Within our narrative inquiry process, we looked across individual narrative accounts to inquire into resonant threads or patterns that could be discerned from the stories of these early school leavers. As we moved to look across narrative accounts, we left the intimate space of the relational between each of us as researcher with a youth participant. The relational shifted to the relationships across the experiences of youths and researchers. In this shift we wanted to offer a deeper and broader awareness of the experiences of early school leavers in order to open up new wonders and questions about early school leaving. In making the shift to discern resonant threads across narrative accounts, we realized that we were “freezing” individual lives in motion as we had represented them in our accounts. We recognize the lives of our participants were still in motion when we co-composed accounts and that their lives and ways of understanding their school experiences continued once the inquiry was completed.

From January through March 2009, we worked with research participants and the narrative accounts to ensure we had not privileged our understandings of the stories over those of the participants. In mid-March 2009, our research group gathered over 2 days to review all of the completed and draft narrative accounts and to look for resonant threads across the lives of the youths. Attending to these threads, we recognized intersections, overlaps, gaps, dissonances, and silences. While initially we identified 15 resonant threads, as we worked with them we realized there were many intersections and overlaps and we could better represent the complexities in six threads.

This chapter explores these six resonant threads:

1. Conversational spaces
2. Relationships
3. Identities
4. Complexities over time
5. Responsibilities
6. Cultural, social, and institutional narratives

In this chapter, we elaborate each thread as a way to understand better the complexities of early school leaving for these youths. We wanted to ensure that the respect we felt in relation with participants continued to come through in the conversations about the lives represented in the accounts and in subsequent writing across these threads.

Conversational Spaces

The narrative accounts all speak clearly to the importance of creating conversational spaces that encouraged the youths to share their life experiences, including their school and school leaving experiences. Off the school landscape and within the narrative inquiry spaces, we engaged with them in difficult conversations that allowed us to look backward and forward, inward and outward, to tell and retell life stories. As we opened up inquiry spaces for conversation, we were moved and humbled by how quickly the youths began to tell their stories. Many of the stories seemed to have been resting in the youths and, at times, their families, waiting to be told. For most, it seemed as if our interactions with them had provided the first opportunity for telling their stories,

uninterrupted. We wondered why some youths had not told these stories earlier and came to understand that they may not have had the spaces or relationships, either in or out of school, to tell their stories. Some of the stories important to the youths were those that could not be told within classrooms or schools, or perhaps even in their own family spaces. We wondered particularly at the lack of in-school spaces in which the youths could tell and retell life stories.

For many of the youths, the research conversations provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their lives, particularly as students, and to begin to retell, that is, to inquire into their lives, including their stories of leaving school prior to graduation. For instance, as Christian told his stories, he spoke of losing the conversation spaces he had while he was in school. Christian wanted to live up to the expectations of his teachers and administrators of good school attendance. Yet, when he needed to attend to his family's needs, he began to drift away from school, having no one there to turn to. Jasmine spoke of having no one to talk to about her stories of leaving school and thought that she didn't "remember anything from way back." The research conversations helped her to think back, and she "learned to remember." Victoria found the placements and courses she was assigned in school left her feeling that she was not moving forward. Steve also acknowledged the place of school within his life story, noting that he plans to return to school when he decides what he wants to do for a career. Leanne spoke of the varied and significant stresses in her life and of the pressure placed on her as she tried to compose a life that included school. As she looked back, she realized leaving was a way of escaping some of the stress created by her school experiences.

Samantha articulated her stories with a sense of curiosity and wonder. She spoke of how her understanding of her unfolding life stories came as she looked back on her school experiences within the context of her life now. Truong, when offered the conversational space in the research, looked back and spoke of how leaving school was one part of his unfolding life. As he reflected on his life, both through talking about the tattoos that decorated his body and his philosophical beliefs, he spoke of how he helped his two younger siblings live stories of staying in school until graduation.

Kevlar, too, found a space to reflect on who he was and was becoming as he spoke. He was amazed to think of “tiny little moments that changed the rest of ... [my] life.” He talked of the stories “as something out of a movie.” As he moved backward and forward in time, Kevlar saw a picture of himself emerging over time. While negotiating the narrative account with us, he said it was good to see his story of leaving school on paper, adding, “Reflecting on it with someone is different than reflecting on it yourself.” The research conversations, as Andrew noted, were a space to tell his life. Bubbles spoke of the experience of sharing his story as a way to help him see that “the whole of my life leads up to why I quit school.”

We came to see these research conversation spaces as important spaces for the youths and for us. We recognized, through our own inquiries, the need for safe inquiry spaces for the youths to be able to explore their life experiences and to learn to attend to the lives that they are composing. We recognized, too, how important it was for us to attend to the tensions in the stories that were shared, tensions that lived within the youths

but also tensions that lived within us as we began to reflect on what these stories were telling us about schools as places and spaces of life and learning.

As the youths reflected on their life stories in thoughtful ways, some spoke of knowing that those who lived around them, teachers, parents, principals, other students, and other people, often storied them in different ways. Andrew spoke of being storied as unworthy of being on the school basketball team but continued to live and tell his stories as someone of value and someone to be valued. For Alice, being able to reflect on conflicting stories of involvement with drugs, violence, and leaving school early alongside those of providing leadership in developing an outreach program at her church, gave her opportunity to more deeply understand herself and the stories she was living.

As we read and reread the narrative accounts, we were struck by the absence of opportunities for these reflective life spaces to occur, and yet we were also deeply impressed by how the youths were able to tell their stories, when given an opportunity, in thoughtful, life-affirming ways.

Some of these stories suggest the youths were attempting to navigate institutional, social, and cultural narratives that were very complex, and sometimes alienating and foreign. Victoria, at age 18, was placed in Grade 10 English as a Second Language classes when she moved to Canada from Somalia, even though English was the language spoken in her home. She felt it was because she was from Africa and spoke English with an accent. “I wanted to be a doctor ... but then when I came here they’re like, oh, you don’t have a Biology, you don’t have a Science and all that. You cannot be a doctor, have to choose another career.” She shifted her forward-looking story to becoming a social

worker, but in order to qualify for a social work program, she needed to have English 30. She was told she would need to pass English 10 and 20 before she could take English 30. Feeling frustrated and bored in her classes, she dropped out of school. Jasmine tried to find a way through institutional narratives by taking some academic classes during the summer, courses she was not allowed to take otherwise.

This inability to be helped to live out their forward-looking stories resonated across many accounts. Victoria, Jasmine, and others found themselves making decisions that were shaping their life stories. But they did not fully understand, at the time, the significance of what was happening to them as they navigated schools. For some, leaving school seemed to make sense at the time. As they engaged in the conversations with us, they spoke of not understanding how institutional narratives had shaped them. For instance, Samantha, who was 22 at the time of our conversations, expressed wonder at the Samantha who, at 16, had left high school. She struggled to understand how she could have let herself make a decision that she eventually came to regret and now views as contrary to her imagined future. She lamented at how she might have been in university with same-aged peers if she had stayed in school. That was one of the reasons she wanted to share her story. “I wanted to tell my story and have it be relevant to something that could be helpful. It’s sort of like a redemption for me. I screwed up so badly by dropping out, this kind of makes me feel better, like it’s actually helping someone for once.” This story of wanting things to be different for youths that come after them was a plotline that resonated across several accounts.

Kevlar faced school and life challenges without support from home and, at times, without a home at all. “It’s really hard to do school when you don’t live anywhere.” It was hard to do “the homework and figure out where you’re going to stay and where you’re going to eat...ended up just going to the mall ’cause it was open 24 hours.” For others, school was not flexible enough to accommodate their specific needs. We wondered about the complexity of institutions and about needing to know resources or people who might have helped them. Some were unaware of who might help or how to ask for help. Others resisted making themselves more vulnerable by approaching those in the institutions. They had learned a story of distrust.

Yet continually we were reminded that each youth’s stories were unique. In Robert’s situation, there were important spaces of conversation with his parents and, toward the end of his time in school, his grandfathers were a help to him. Others, like Scott, did know how to live within the institutional plotlines. He negotiated his absences with his teachers so they would go unreported to his parents. “I don’t know how I did it, like 212 days I missed in Grade 11 and 12. I never even got a letter. How do you get away with that?” This negotiation allowed him to miss much of Grades 11 and 12 without immediate consequences, but, as a result, he did not graduate.

Negotiating institutional landscapes was complex in many ways. Bullying at school is another area where some youths attempted to navigate situations often on their own. Robert spoke of skipping gym classes, where bullying was rampant in his opinion. Although he received failing marks in physical education and his parents were not happy with his decision to skip school, nevertheless, he saw no way to participate in gym class

while also living the stories taught to him within his family: stories that good Samaritans turn the other cheek and that fighting is an unacceptable way of resolving differences.

The importance of conversational spaces for telling and retelling life stories became evident in the research conversations. We wondered if such conversation spaces along the way might have helped some of the youths to feel less alone in composing their lives within complex institutional, social, cultural, and familial narratives.

Relationships

The importance of relationships to the youths was multidimensional and became visible throughout our research. The participants' relationships with family, peers, programs of study, and teachers, as well as the interruption of relationships through disruptions and transitions, exemplifies the significance of relationship – connection and association – when we think about early school leaving.

Relationship With Family and Friends

Relationships with family and friends were intertwined in the lives of all of our participants. Lynn's relationship with her family shaped how she left school as she composed her life. Her relationships with her grandmother and her grandmother's long-term partner were powerful and shaped her actions. Lynn knew this man was not her biological father but she loved him and referred to him as her father. When Lynn's grandmother became ill with cancer, Lynn lived out a story in which she could sustain her family and cultural stories. Seeing her grandmother so ill and working to cook and

clean for family members spoke to what mattered to Lynn, that is, her relationship with family.

In Truong's stories, relationships with his mother and younger siblings were also dominant threads. He lived his life with a strong sense of care and responsibility for his mother and his siblings. And for Jasmine, the relationship with her uncle was a strong thread in the stories she told about her life. Her uncle always encouraged her to do well at school and took the time to help her with her studies. Jasmine still fondly remembers her relationship with her study group of six girls when she and her family lived as refugees in northern Africa. At that time she saw herself as an academically strong student because she was "among the top 10 in [her] class!" These storied relationships were powerful in Jasmine's stories of who she was, and was becoming.

As with many of the youths, relationships with family were strong. For example, relationships with family were strong in Robert's unfolding stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Robert's knowledge of the schools he attended was informed by the prior experiences of his four older brothers, whose stories shaped how he lived on those school landscapes. Robert's relationship with his parents and grandparents also significantly shaped his school life. Not only did they provide support and spaces for Robert to explore his school experiences, but they also offered ways to understand the possibilities school held for his unfolding life.

Relationships with peers, both in school and out, were important to many of the youths' stories. These relationships seemed to give them a sense of self-worth. Steve's peers, who knew he was not attending school, sought him out at home during lunch or at

the end of the day, when they hung out and listened to music with him. Through Scott's stories, we saw how his unfolding stories seemed to be shaped by gaps between himself and those he would have liked to have had as friends.

Friendships were also important for Samantha. Being away from school also meant being away from friends, and gradually she became disconnected from both: "Sometimes I'd go for a week without seeing anybody, talking to anybody. It made me miserable when I realized that I was missing out on so much ... really, really big change when I started leaving my friends behind." As Samantha's friends drifted away, she began to rely on Internet chat rooms for companionship, stating, "So I think that might have been how I survived all that, without all my friends, 'cause I did have that option to go and talk to random strangers."

During Kevlar's later years in elementary school he was living in a motel. He considered himself the most unpopular student in the school and often felt he did not fit in with his peers. Yet during junior high, when he experienced a semblance of family stability, he had a "good group of friends," who, similar to Steve's, would come together during the noon hour or after school. Outside of school, however, because he moved so often, Kevlar continually needed to make new friends; yet, although he made friends in each new location, he also needed to face that "friends can only go so far ... because they're not in the same situation."

However, we learned from how relationships with friends and family can be lost. This loss of family in Kevlar's stories is expressed in his telling of his relationships with individual members of his family. It is also expressed through his telling of the

complicated time when, for 2 years, he was living in various foster homes or staying with friends, eventually becoming homeless. Loss of relationships eventually ended in abandonment and shaped his story that it was his “screwed up family” that led to his leaving school early.

Relationships With Subject Matter

Relationships with subject matter resonated with many participants, often influencing their decision to leave school early. Hands-on science activities engaged Steve until high school, but in Grades 11 and 12 he repeatedly failed his science courses. As we thought about Steve’s stories, we wondered what this fractured relationship with science might be telling us. Did his disengagement from school begin with science, and was it shaped by his unwillingness to ask for help from teachers? Or was it a faint sense of resistance to being engaged with his schooling?

Bubbles loved school in Grades 1 to 3, especially reading, but when he was made to attend a faith-based school in Grade 4 where there were few books to read and no school library to visit, he rebelled. Bubbles began to misbehave and not do his school work, even though he knew he could do the assigned tasks. On the other hand, Kevlar described his learning to play the saxophone in Grade 7 as “awesome.” He liked learning the practical arts such as home economics as he was aware it would help him with his interest in cooking. In both high schools he attended, Kevlar engaged with the learning process, especially in the school libraries and computer and media classes.

Scott was clear about his interest in, and need for, independent, self-directed learning. Finding a school context in which he could engage in this type of learning and realizing that in this way he could control his learning enabled him to be comfortable within the school. When he moved to a school that had a more traditional, classroom-based approach to teaching and learning, he lost this sense of direct relationship with, and influence over, his learning. Jasmine's relationship with subject matter shifted as she moved from Arabic to English. Spending the first 2 years learning ESL, she found that she enjoyed hands-on learning activities in her fashion and cosmetology classes. However, Jasmine knew she needed to take particular academic subjects and pass them if she wanted to go to university. When her attempts to choose those school subjects were blocked and discouraged by some of her teachers, Jasmine saw no point in staying and finishing high school.

School mattered to Lynn in junior high. Her love of all sports – floor hockey, football, and tackle sports – influenced by her growing up with two brothers, shaped her stories of herself as good in sports. Through her stories, Lynn made visible how being good at sports shaped her relationship with the school building, academic subjects, “friends, the teachers, and especially the principal.”

For both Andrew and Truong, it was their passion for, and their excellence in, sports that kept them in school. Andrew's relationship with school was so interwoven with his membership on the high school basketball team that when he was no longer part of the team, going to school became impossible. Having lost his place on the team, he lost his relationship with school. Something similar happened with Truong. When the

teacher who coached the volleyball team was transferred out of the school and there was no longer the possibility of a volleyball team for him, Truong began to drift away from school. Being able to excel at sports had made school a place where he could belong. When that relationship vanished, he no longer felt he belonged in school.

Relationships With Teachers

Robert helped us to see the influence relationships with teachers held in his life and, as well, how these relationships shaped his interactions with, and feelings about, subject matter. When he felt a teacher cared about him or the subject matter they taught, he reciprocated by caring about the teacher. This reciprocity was made evident in his accounts of his Grade 5 teacher, the principal of his elementary school, and his high school social studies teacher. Robert's school experiences were also shaped by stories of what he understood as teachers and others not caring. These stories became particularly visible in his stories of how many teachers did not respond to the ongoing bullying he experienced in elementary and junior high school, and how in high school there seemed to be a commonplace story that "teachers aren't there to babysit," which meant students either did their academic work or teachers "didn't care."

Scott reflected upon his relationships with teachers, recalling these relationships as being independent of subject matter, and saw them as grounded in his ability to have meaningful discussions with teachers who shared his interests, particularly his passion for discussing literature, politics, personal values, and moral beliefs. Somewhat similar were Steve's reflections about teachers liking him. Steve spoke of how his junior and senior

high school teachers liked him and encouraged him to attend school. He spoke positively of his Grade 12 English teacher as someone who gave him strategies to help him overcome the difficulties he was experiencing.

Shortly after Alice's parents divorced, her stories of belonging in her new school started to shift. By junior high, less than a month into the new year, she recalled her math teacher telling her she wouldn't make it as more than a gas jockey or Burger King server. Alice became less and less interested in school and began to miss classes, lacking any relationship with teachers.

Jasmine appreciated her first ESL teacher in Canada. She felt comfortable with this particular teacher, whom she felt communicated with all her students effectively. However, she was told repeatedly by other teachers that her English was not good enough to do this or that. Discouraged, she gave up and decided to stay out of school.

Kevlar spoke of his Grades 3 and 4 teachers fondly. In particular, he recalled how they had small reward systems when he did something well. He also storied how the librarians in the various high schools he attended took the time to talk to him. In this way, Kevlar experienced them as "more human." Zachary spoke highly of his Grades 3 and 4 science teachers, the "mad scientists." Zachary described a decline in his marks and in his interest in school by Grade 6. "The teachers started getting really strict. There's no more fun in the classroom. You can't do this. You can't do that. Sit straight. Shut up. Head up." When teachers and the content presented were engaging or fun, Zachary enjoyed school. Despite being impressed by a high school English teacher who allowed him to read a story of Led Zeppelin for an assignment, by the time he entered high school he was

disenchanted. “I just didn’t want to be in school any more. The teachers weren’t any fun to learn from any more, lectures were just getting dull, sitting there learning about stuff that you think you’d never use in the real world.”

Samantha remembered that she had wonderful teachers in junior high who tried to help her succeed. There was one teacher who Samantha occasionally visited in her classroom after school. “My ninth grade teacher, she was really, really wonderful. I would talk to her whenever I was really down.” She had great expectations of turning things around in high school but found it very impersonal and not what she had expected. Samantha may not have had access to the kind of help that might have made a difference. “Nothing came up about how I was feeling ... It was just about why I wasn’t attending school or doing what I was supposed to.” It seems she became more focused on threats of expulsion rather than attempts they made to help her. “I was still missing all that school and I think the thoughts that triggered it were my teachers telling me that I would have to leave ... they would expel me if I kept missing or I wasn’t keeping up my marks.”

Interruption of Relationships Through Transitions

Broken relationships resonated throughout some stories as the youths struggled to make sense of sometimes unexpected transitions. In some stories we heard, transitions were traumatic events, occurring when important relationships were interrupted. At times we heard stories of youths shaping new stories to live by, stories around being successful and being accepted as students, students who belonged. However, these newly emerging stories to live by were fragile, often rupturing in times of transition. A profound sense of

loss and confusion occurred as the youths became disconnected amidst these times of transition.

Often, upheaval in family relationships created vulnerability for youths as they struggled to compose new stories to live by as they transitioned into reconfigured families and new homes, communities, and schools. For example, when Samantha's parents divorced, she felt the transition triggered a kind of helpless response where she was no longer interested in school. Alice hated having to leave her community and childhood friends to enroll in a new school where she was not known.

Moves to new schools also caused moments of disruption and opened up spaces where participants felt vulnerable, adrift, and alone. Lives were interrupted and connections were lost in transition to new schools. When Scott changed schools, he took a story, imposed on him by his former school, with him. But it was not the story he knew of himself, and so he found himself feeling exposed and judged instantly and unfairly. Billie Bob found her new high school lacked the relational engagement she had learned to live in her former school. Skye couldn't find a way to fit into her new school in the city and felt she was "two or three grades behind the city kids."

Considering unexpected transitions in relation to early school leavers, we noted turmoil and loss in some of the youths' stories. Their stories do not describe schools as belonging places in these places and times of transitions.

Identities

The youths were composing their identities on elementary, junior high, and senior high school landscapes as well as on complex home and community landscapes. While they saw themselves composing who they were and were becoming, they did not tell their stories as dropouts.

After telling us his stories of struggle and survival, Kevlar said, “To be honest I really am actually so grateful for the way that I grew up . . . I could actually grow up and be myself. Not many people get that opportunity.” It seemed Kevlar was imagining a way to use his life stories as a way to compose his life as “street smart,” as someone who could “make it” despite daunting circumstances. He would keep at it. We wondered about Kevlar’s lotus flower tattoo, a symbol of hope amidst the multiple losses and turbulence in his life. Perhaps the tattoo signifies a forward-looking story of hope for Kevlar as he composes coherence out of pieces hard to hang together (Carr, 1986).

By Grade 7, Scott already had a sense of hierarchy among peers. His experiences made him feel that he was “better than some” students, but not as good as others. It wasn’t long before he felt as if he didn’t fit within the class system in his particular junior high school, and he began searching to find a belonging place. Scott remembered his first day of junior high as a crucial day for him. Feeling self-conscious, he worried that others were judging him much as he was beginning to judge others. He understood that “what I wore was important and what I said and how I looked and those things were important.” Scott acquired a sense of agency when he started both to speak out and stand out, through what he said and what he wore: “The more powerful I appear – people are going to want

to hear what I have to say.” He named himself as courageous. As he grew stronger, he no longer wanted to live a cover story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) by pretending to be someone he wasn’t.

Victoria felt pulled to the positive experiences in her past as she talked about her home and family in her home country. But she also felt repelled by her negative experiences, lamenting the lack of time to be an adolescent and growing up with no father. Coming from a different country, not familiar with the Canadian system, she felt her opportunities to become who she wanted to be in Canada were limited.

Like Victoria, Jasmine also moved to Canada from another country. An academically strong student, Jasmine had dreams of becoming a doctor, working for the United Nations, or becoming a pharmacist. She saw Canada as a place of hope and possibilities. Labeled as an ESL student, she was not allowed to take the academic courses she needed to go to university. Although she managed to find her way around the system, taking a couple of courses during the summer and passing them, Jasmine finally lost heart and decided to leave school early. Growing up in a family that valued education, Jasmine knew that she would return to school one day, but only on her own terms. For both Victoria and Jasmine, becoming adults amidst a new language and culture was not an easy process as they both struggled to compose an identity in Canada.

Alice’s stories in and out of school presented conflicting images of who she was and who she was becoming. Alice struggled in school after Grade 3, due in part to unidentified learning disabilities. Her junior high years were marked by violent behaviour, and she was judged as having limited employment prospects. Eventually she

became involved in drugs. However, she also lived out stories of leadership and compassion for youths at risk. As a teen, she initiated the formation of an outreach youth group for those who did not “fit in” and later developed a blog to educate youths who might be experimenting with drug use. Alice said she sometimes felt like she was a psychologist. She was proud of all she had done in life so far.

Lynn struggled with who she knew she was and what her life circumstances had forced her to become. In order to take care of her family, she composed her life in particular ways. Selling drugs as a way to financially support her family, she named herself “a hypocrite” because she regretted her actions. “I know I’m hurting people’s families. I know I’m doing all that but I need to take care of mine. I need to support my family. I was taking care of my family. That’s the only reason why I did it. I know it was a negative decision.” Lynn is now on her own and trying to focus on the stories she is living and who she is becoming within this different context.

Skye lost her way in the urban setting when she moved. She had to put her strong cultural belief system out of the picture as she left her cultural ways behind. She felt she did not fit in at a big high school, stating, “I am not a city person.”

It is important to note that we met the youths some time after they had left school. They told their stories of leaving school early from a position of an out-of-school place. We realized in our conversations with them that their involvement in this study was, for some, the first time they had told their stories. Rereading the narrative accounts, we noticed many participants resisting the story of being labeled as dropouts. Being positioned in this way gave them little chance to “drop” back in, something a few

participants were now contemplating. Tensions arose when participants spoke of others referring to them as dropouts and how not accepting that label supported them to express who they were and were becoming. Thinking hard about what they were telling us, and realizing many of them felt there was no place for their voices in school, we wondered if by resisting the story imposed on them – that is, of being high school dropouts – they were reclaiming their voices. Scott described it in the following way:

I still don't identify myself as a high school dropout ... I tell people I completed 3 years of high school ... and it put me in a position where at 20 years old I have a professional job ... when I think of high school dropout I think of the guy who works at 7-11 and can't afford his rent ... and that's not who I am. I'm not a high school drop-out. I'm, I'm somebody ... who recognizes the unimportance of high school ... I just chose ... not to finish high school.

Scott made visible that the label ascribed to him by others did not, and does not, resonate with who he understands himself to be or who he sees himself becoming. Scott's story of a high school dropout, that is, someone who struggles financially and is not able to make ends meet, is a fairly common stereotype. This is not the story Scott is living nor is he willing to be defined or confined by the label.

Non-achievement of a high school diploma did not shape Scott's understandings of who he was or who he could become. He showed us it did not shape the stories he is currently living, particular stories in his current and past work places. Since leaving high school, Scott has been engaged working with youths who have been victims of bullying or, to use Scott's words, "abused ... by peers." Scott speaks of his current work site as a

place, and space, where his voice is heard and reverberates into the lives of youths who are, perhaps, in danger of leaving school early.

Steve also did not accept the label of dropout. Steve's story is more of stepping away from schooling until he had a better sense of what he wanted to study and for what purpose. He imagined himself returning to school, and eventually going to university. Nor did Kevlar identify himself as a dropout. Even as he made it all the way to Grade 12 through extraordinary efforts he ended up leaving school early. He identified himself as one who knew the value and necessity of education for pursuing his dream of attending design college so he could become a creative graphic designer.

In defying or rejecting the label of dropout, we recognized the youths were composing their own identities. Plotlines moving toward a return to school or toward leaving school were evident as we listened to their stories over time. We heard them struggle to develop and sustain a sense of agency embodied in their lives as they unfolded over time. Participating in the study itself was, for many, an act of choice that shaped a sense of authoring/authority in their lives. Kevlar, for example, wanted to be part of the study. He noticed it on an Internet website and chose to make contact by email. Kevlar thought we would be interested in his story of leaving school as he imagined it might be different than most. For him it wasn't about school but about the stress and difficulty of his life outside of school. Lynn's decision to be part of the study reflected her knowing her own comfort level. Like the other youths, she chose to participate in the study on her own terms. She required an opportunity to meet with the researcher, and she needed her friend close by for reassurance on the first official interview.

Their complex life stories show a sense of them composing their own lives, sometimes in conversation with others, sometimes alone. Kevlar chose to “get off the streets” himself and to live in a group home. “I just decided to change things ’cause I was going to die if I didn’t.” He chose to “accept it for what it was.” Andrew also acted alone as he gradually drifted away from school. When asked if his mother had visited the school around the time he was kicked off the basketball team, Andrew said he did not think she could help. He chose to accept the coach’s actions. For him, doing what seemed the “right thing” was his own decision.

Lynn also acted alone. Disappointed in herself for selling drugs, she did so because she felt she had no other option to take care of her family. Other choices Lynn made were ones for which she was proud, for example her choice to “grow” and get her dad and her brother “back” after the family disintegrated with the death of her grandmother. As Lynn composed a forward-looking story, she weighed her commitment to graduate from a postsecondary program in the food industry with her need to earn money to support her future life and her wish to parent a child. Lynn said, “I am not speaking to anyone. I rely on myself.”

For some participants, staying in school did not fit with their forward-looking stories, and to stay meant conforming to stories others wanted them to live by. Robert lived by a strong family story given to him by his grandfathers of valuing “working with your hands,” even though teachers and administrators supported a more academic route for him. Choosing a story more coherent (Carr, 1986) with what he had learned from his

grandfathers, Robert left high school and after a short period of time began apprenticing as a mechanic.

Samantha felt that no one could have done anything to get her to go back to school. She had to decide for herself or “she wouldn’t have had the heart to do it.” She chose to finish high school through correspondence, yet when people were telling her “this exact stuff ... I didn’t care ... I wasn’t listening.”

Both Steve and Zachary were given choices set by their parents; they could choose to stay in school or leave and get a job. A faint sense of resistance seems to permeate both stories. Zachary, after first choosing to leave school for a job at a ski resort, and then choosing to return to school because he needed the money, said that he would be quitting once again. “I said I quit school once before, I’m gonna do it again. I’m an expert at it now.” Is Zachary subtly resisting the either/or choice his parents gave him? Steve took part in the study because his mother wanted him to. Many questions elicited “can’t remember ... I don’t know” responses from Steve. Resistance and independence seemed to shape Steve’s stories. The youths’ stories to live by resist the labels *school dropout* or *at risk* as they compose their stories to live by.

Complexities Across Time

Looking at stories of early school leaving over time opened possibilities for a deeper understanding of the youths’ lives. The temporal perspective drew our attention to a pattern. Leaving school early is not a single event. Kevlar’s chronicles of events leading up to his leaving school are an example. Against his background of multiple, diverse,

unstable, and sometimes hostile home places are the continually fragmented and transient school experiences he underwent. A different pattern is discerned from Truong and Andrew's stories. For both, undulating patterns of drifting off (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) permeated the narratives, as they gradually lost interest in attending school when sports were no longer a part of their school lives. A pattern of unraveling emerged from Alice's stories of the happier time when she was in her primary grades to her experiences later on.

As we came to know the complexity of stories lived over time, both in and out of school, narrative threads related to participants' yearning to be recognized as "someone" started to emerge. Interwoven in their stories to live by were sometimes contradictory plotlines that led participants to leave school early.

For example, Zachary found ways to "fit in" and connect with activities in his elementary school classroom. As he grew older, he experienced learning in the classroom as dull and strict, and over time he became less and less engaged. Attending school became a competing story as he began to compose an identity that did not include school. Alice began school as a popular child, but as she struggled with unidentified learning disabilities in new schools she began to engage in aggressive behaviour and with drugs. Alice also lived other stories of who she was, and was becoming, as a youth outreach worker and as someone storied in her family and community as a source of strength and support. For Alice this competing story of herself as someone with purpose and commitment to help those in need became a stronger story than the one with which she graduated high school. There is resonance in Truong and Andrew's stories. As team

sports players, they were learning to live their stories as strong, highly skilled players.

When they were no longer able to live out these stories of who they were in school, they drifted off. These stories give us a greater sense of the complexity and contradictions as they left.

For some participants, the yearning to live out a story of being a student led to a continual returning to school. Confusion and upheaval dominated the out-of-school stories that Kevlar lived. Yet he made choices to return to one new school after another, despite contexts that created emotional, physical, and personal challenges. Perhaps over time with all the turmoil, school itself may have become a stabilizing thread in his stories to live by. Kevlar even tried to “do school” when homeless and living in “random places” and the mall.

During this time I started Grade 10 at George Wood and I kept trying to do it as much as I could living in random places. But it’s really hard to do school when you don’t live anywhere. I could do the school ... its just like after school. I would have to do my homework figure out where I’m going to stay figure out if I’m going to make it through the day.

It is when we hear that education is the “key to life,” in Kevlar’s words, and that he loved learning the saxophone in junior high and computers and graphics in senior high, that we begin to understand that Kevlar’s leaving school in Grade 12 was not a decision composed around a dislike for school. His eventual reason to leave school was bound up within his desire to do well in school. He could not do well in school with the living arrangements he had. Yet he was not able enroll in a fourth year of high school

even after months of significant effort. For Kevlar, his experiences represented an ironic contradiction; he was denied the opportunity to finish Grade 12 and become the educated person he yearned to be. If we had not heard his story, would we have come to understand his experiences over time? Would Kevlar simply have looked like a student with a transient, multiple school attendance record who had ultimately quit school?

When Jasmine wanted to study subjects she knew would help her achieve her life goals and become who she wanted to be, she was told that her English was not good enough to attain those goals. She was forced to take courses that would not allow her to enter the postsecondary program of her choice. She left school.

Bubbles, too, returned over and over to diverse school settings even as he lived in difficult contexts. He told a story of being proud of a completed assignment he brought to his high school teacher. When the teacher turned away and did not acknowledge his achievement in that moment, he felt abandoned. When Bubbles left school for good, the disappointment seemed to echo multiple moments of loss in his life outside of school. We wondered how his leaving school early might have been storied by those who had never heard his story.

Complexity, multilayered stress, and continuous tension resonated through many of the youths' stories. Victoria's and Lynn's stories portrayed the contradictions their lives in home and family created with their lives in school. Lynn storied how hard she was on herself for letting herself fall into alcohol and substance abuse after the death of her grandmother, while also storying her grandmother's desire that she finish school. She was caught between multiple plotlines and left school early to provide for herself and her

brother. These stories became available to us only as we attended to the youths' lives as composed over time.

Looking across multiple stories, we are struck by the complexity of stories lived when whole lives are considered. When early school leaving is considered as a complex set of storied events composed over time, the notion of a discrete decision or factor in dropping out of school becomes problematic. Complexity over time becomes evident in the lives of the youths who left school early.

Responsibilities

Relational responsibility threads were evident in many of the narrative accounts. Many of the youths were composing lives in which they struggled to balance conflicting responsibilities. At times it seemed as though they were trying to compose lives that allowed them to shift between, and across, multiple responsibilities. The institutional, familial, and cultural narratives in which they were embedded shaped their experiences.

Many participants lived their lives threaded around plotlines of responsibility to, and for, family. They struggled to compose their own lives but did so in ways that allowed them to stay connected with one or more parent and siblings. Sometimes these responsibilities were financial. We see this in Victoria's story as she worked to compose her own life but remained committed to helping financially support her mother and siblings.

Something similar is evident in Truong's story, as he lived out a story of being responsible in relation to his younger siblings and to his mother, and now to his young

daughter. Truong began to live out his story in his family early in life, getting a job in the same restaurant his mother worked in before he was of legal working age. He later contributed money to support the family and often provided physical protection for his mother and his younger siblings.

In Lynn's story, too, we see her managing multiple responsibilities as she attended to household duties and cared for her grandmother. Christian was also composing his life attentive to a home life with a mother who had mental health issues and who struggled to find social support. Christian, with an absent father, in many ways needed to support his family financially and, like Truong, began to live a story of oldest male in the family. Like Truong, he positioned himself in a place where he could support and encourage his sister to stay in school. The stories of Lynn, Truong, Christian, and Victoria were nested within family responsibilities. Attending to family responsibilities at the heart of composing their lives outside of school often made it challenging for them to negotiate attending to responsibilities they knew were important to composing a life in school.

Many of the youths had to make sense of these conflicting responsibilities on their own. Trying to compose a life in which he dreamed as a little boy of becoming a "big scientist," Bubbles struggled among various home and family locations and situations that eventually led him to live in a shelter to escape beatings. He sought places to live that allowed him to live out his responsibilities to attend school while being physically safe outside of school. Jules also found herself alone, as she struggled to live in a home where the electricity had been cut off but not wanting to tell anyone because it would mean

social services would intervene with possible negative consequences for her and her mother. Caught with multiple responsibilities, Jules often found herself responsible for herself, her lunch, her finances, and other aspects of her life. Amidst a social narrative that assumed family support, it was difficult for her to negotiate the conflicting responsibilities around composing a life.

Family stories, which are often shaped intergenerationally, shaped the youths' responses and responsibility in relation to school. In other words, the youths embodied stories taught to them by generations of family members. Robert, in particular, made this intergenerational dimension visible when he explored his work ethic. Explaining stories he lived by, Robert said, "I have a strong work ethic installed in me." Tracing the story of this work ethic back to what he saw as its foundation, Robert highlighted how his mother's father had taught her to have a strong work ethic, a lesson she then passed on to Robert. Reading across the narrative accounts, stories of several youths were shaped by family stories supporting the importance of high school. Lynn storied how her grandmother encouraged her to complete high school and tried to support her in doing so. Jasmine's and Billie Bob's stories also spoke of family stories that valued education. Jasmine's uncle provided both emotional and financial support after Jasmine moved to Canada. He encouraged Jasmine to do well at school and spent time helping her with schoolwork. Billie Bob's father provided financial support through two college programs, and her strong commitment to education was part of her own stories. As a youngster she loved school and did well. Later, with continual interruptions to her high school experiences, she chose to successfully complete assignments even when not attending.

Today, still one credit short, Billie Bob is focused on obtaining her high school diploma so she can pass the story of the importance of education to her daughter.

Steve shared a belief in the importance school held in his family's stories. He highlighted how his parents were involved with their children's schools. In particular, Steve described how his mother initiated a change of schools when he was in Grade 1 because she disapproved of the way he was being taught and concerned about the possible long-term impact his experiences in this classroom might have on his schooling. Steve's parents told a story of high school completion as critical for success in life.

Family stories also shaped stories in which school was not important. Zachary's and Samantha's stories told of family members who had not finished high school and yet were "successful." We also saw moments in which family stories and school stories bumped against each other. We saw family stories and school stories in contradiction as Robert storied his grandfather telling him that high school students were supported either for going to university or trade school. Robert soon learned his desires to enter a trade were neither acknowledged nor supported in the stories foregrounded in the high school he attended.

Cultural, Social, Institutional Narratives

All stories are embedded within social, cultural, institutional, and family narratives that shape, and are shaped by, individual stories to live by. Considering the stories the youths told, we saw how these narratives also shaped diverse their unfolding lives. In Ben's stories, we saw how his life was embedded within a cultural narrative,

shaped over time and by geography. He saw himself as Burmese, yet he was uncomfortable being named so by others in public. Christian tried to reconcile his story of himself as of Asian heritage with his story of being Canadian. One could not so easily follow the patterns of assimilation and multiculturalism, and Ben was often reminded of this by being placed in an ESL class and by the stories teachers told about him: that he was different, that he was less able. Cultural narratives were imposed on and lived out by these youths. As we attended to the cultural, social, and institutional narratives within which the youths composed their lives, we noted competing plotlines that shaped stories to live by. We attended to the institutional narratives that were often imposed on these youths.

We wondered about the ways success, achievement, and failure were storied within institutional narratives, stories of school. We wondered if achieving success within a story of school means students need to be passive and compliant. Kevlar reflected on school in general as he told stories of his experience. He understood school as a kind of culture for “kids who have perfect lives and perfect parents.”

The youths’ stories also told of contradictions between cultural narratives and stories of school. Caught sometimes in these contradictions, youths were humiliated or embarrassed in front of other students. Scott reminded us that homophobia continued to live strongly within schools, where the cultural and institutional narratives have long-lasting, shaping influences on people’s lives.

Within the institutional landscape, claiming an identity can be more challenging than passively accepting one. Many youths recalled labels that branded them as “less

than,” lazy, and not committed. We wondered about Truong who was seen as the “Asian” kid and was stereotyped, or Christian with his spiked haircut, or Ben who came from places we know little about. How did these institutional narratives play out in some of the stories of how fast a particular youth was expelled or dismissed? What happened when children and youths do not fit easily into the story of a “good” student? Christian had tattoos and a different hairstyle; he always felt he was easily judged, the story of him shaped by the place he lived, the “inner city,” with the underlying social narratives of gangs, drugs, etc., that became inextricably linked.

Lynn reminded us that cultural narratives live in our skins and personal lives. “Anyone can see that I’m Native.” Working to shift her stories to live by, Lynn was exploring her heritage and had visited and reconnected with many of her extended family. “I’m Native. I’m full Cree. I’m just not Treaty. It [heritage] has already played a big part in my life.” Lynn was living the cultural narrative when she was expected to stay home and care for family members when her grandmother was sick. Lynn knew the cultural narrative in her body. Cultural narratives are not only embedded in the geographic places we are born into, or in the colour of skin. Alice, like others, reminds us of the cultural narratives of youth subcultures and gangs, drugs, and violence.

Some youths experienced the profound shaping of stories of school. Victoria noted that while she had attended school in Africa, her educational experience was not considered by the Alberta system. She found herself placed in classes that covered content already known to her. Additionally, since Victoria spoke English with an accent, the school tried to place her in ESL classes. Victoria noted her first language was

English, since that was the only language that her parents had in common. Similarly, Jasmine stated she had a strong academic background in Arabic, but when her only option for taking academic courses in the English language were outside of regular school days, her interest in school waned. Skye reported she had little freedom in selecting classes. She registered late for school and was placed into classes that had room but which also were not popular. Scott stated that he did not want to be placed in classes at a lower grade level because not only did he believe that he had the competence for the higher-level classes, he “didn’t want to look like a fool. I didn’t want people to think I was stupid.”

Victoria complained that the institutional narrative precluded her from remaining in high school past a particular age, regardless of circumstance. The crumbling image of Ben lives so vividly, the sense of him sinking into a pit, where others can’t see, can’t ask, can’t dwell on the difference of others. We did not hear him tell stories of inquiry, of questions, no sign of a more critical ontological stance in his life. We sensed a kind of emotional defeat that grew out of both Ben’s and Scott’s stories, stories that neither could shake yet refused to live by. We sensed feelings of disgrace that lived far beyond the moments of initial shaming. The shaming was not easily erased, and for Ben shaped how he could interact. Ben’s only agency, much like Scott’s, remained in looking away. At the same time both wanted to be heard and have their stories told.

Shame also came from a sense of class consciousness, something Kevlar was acutely aware of. Kevlar said his school was an “amazing school ’cause it’s in Shaftsbury. Everything is. The people are a lot cleaner. They’re from a higher grade, like

they're just more upscale I guess. And there's just not all the bullshit ghetto drama like the city has." Kevlar often could not reveal the places he lived when he went to school. He did not want to evoke feelings in others that he was "less than."

That was not as easily done for others. For Ben, the colour of his skin and his ability to speak English became instant outward identifiers. He was unable to negotiate power differentials and felt obliged to answer his teachers' questions. He felt powerless when his stories were told without his consent to others, both in and out of the classroom.

These six threads were pulled forward, but there are many other possible threads in the complexity of these youths' lives.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS/LOOKING

These wonders that emerged out of our work with the 19 youths also trouble some of the literature. A powerful conceptualization in much of the early school leaving literature is around risk factors and resiliency. Yet we have come to understand, through the youths, that their lives cannot be broken up into a series of factors. And what might be seen as a risk factor for one is perhaps resilience in others. Risk factors freeze identities; we came to understand their lives as more fluid.

Much of the early school leaving literature views school leaving as a singular event, rather than a process over time. Some youths and their lives showed us there was a process of leaving and returning. For all, education continued to be a part of their lives; it is a constant refrain in their stories. Often, the singular event is fixed in time, yet we learned that their leaving was often contemplated over time. Their leaving showed narrative authority and often led to further reflection in their lives.

In the initial conceptualization that was informed by the literature, we struggled to identify the labels *dropout* and *pushout*. The youths resisted all of the labels we, or the literature, assigned to them; they never saw themselves as leaving school.

The youths made us wonder about the assumptions that were present in the literature, but also in our lives, that is, that school completion was success. Yet, when we attended closely to their lives, we awakened to some of our assumptions: Is school a good place for everyone? Is it a good place at all times? Is it the only place to be successful? There were moments in the youths' stories where they experienced a good teacher, a good friend, a good principal. Yet there were also times when school was a difficult

place, or when their lives outside of school were too complex. What shapes our notion of success? There was an absence in the literature about the powerful influence of university requirements on school structures and completion success. We began to wonder about these absences, as well as the requirements for entry into employment and further learning experiences.

Our work with the youths speaks powerfully to the need for all of us to listen, to stay quiet and listen. Might the stories of these youth then begin to shape the kinds of places schools become? Might schools bend and become pliable as we listen, become mindful and value the stories youths are living by? Might a stance of mindfulness on the part of all who interact with youths in school and out, enlarge the possibilities for encouraging and supporting youths to compose their lives in ways that are meaningful to them?

Remembering the youths' stories and our relationships with them, we wonder how their dreams about who they might want to become can be supported. What role do we play in this – we, as members of their larger community, as teachers, nurses, parents, friends, and others – we in all of our multiple roles? How do we shape their identity making? Do we live on the margins of who they are or do we enter the personal and intimate relational spaces, spaces that call forth engagement and relational responsibilities? What place do we have and how do we shape their identity making in the absence of our immediate presence. As a society, how do we honour the diverse identities; how do we support and encourage this diversity?

Hearing the youths' complicated life stories composed around multiple changes, we wonder how their lives can help us question the singular notion of transition from school to work. We wonder where the stories are to help youths negotiate these in-between spaces. How do we re-imagine transitions that honour the lives of the youths, their families and their relationships as sources of knowledge for composing ways to live through the daily life transitions that are part of the larger more visible transitions?

Thinking back on what the youths were telling us through their stories, we saw how schools were narrowly defined only as places for *students* – students who need to gain prescribed knowledge, skills and attitudes. Seen only through these parameters, we saw how the youths were required to leave their multiplicity, the wholeness of who they were and the stories they were in the midst of living, at the door of the classroom or school. Coming to this realization we wondered what might happen if school was understood as a space where learning and living were intertwined. Attending to schooling in this way allows us to pay attention to the particularities of each youth's unfolding life. In this way, then, we cannot ignore the difficulties, disruptions, celebrations that are influencing them. Thinking in this way we see the importance of schools as sites of collaboration, sites where students interact with peers, with parents, with teachers and principals, with counselors and therapists, with nurses and speech language pathologists and other service providers.

We wonder about these youths' experiences of high school. The resistance encountered when trying to change a particular course of study? Might it be easier to remain in school had their need to care for family been recognized and accommodated?

Might an additional opportunity to write a final diploma exam have allowed another to graduate? Had these youths found spaces to share, reflect and inquire into their experiences and particular challenges, might there have been room for flexibility to accommodate their lived realities and individual needs as they continued to compose a forward-looking story?

We wonder about the lock-step nature of schooling and how much impact missing a step or two might have on the youths' lives. For many of the youth we worked with during this inquiry, their life circumstances did not allow them to follow the steps leading to high school completion. We wonder about multiple alternatives that might be available. We realize we are locked into a school system that is built on efficiency. Yet how can we become more responsive to individual youths' lives? To how youths' prior experiences shape their possibilities regardless of their abilities. How do we honour youths' interests rather than organizing their lives according to school subjects? Do we all learn at the same pace? Do we all march to the same beat? Does the march always need to move forward?

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APPENDIX A. RISK FACTORS FOR EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Social factors	Socioeconomic and political factors	School-related characteristics	Family background/ demographics	Personal characteristics
<p>PEERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social life and having fun³ • peer values^{4,5} • bonds with antisocial peers⁴ • rejection by school peers⁴ • feeling less popular⁴ • lack of sociability^{1,6} • not many school friends and more working friends^{1,4} <p>NEIGHBORHOOD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • subculture⁷ • value system⁷ <p>COMMUNITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • living in troubled⁴ or 	<p>ECONOMIC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • globalization, neo-liberal perspectives • unidimensional, calculative, individualistic consumer rationalism¹³ • consumer culture evokes consumer desires⁸ • new economies⁷ • favorable labor opportunities¹ • increase in minimum wage⁹ • decline in the unemployment rate⁹ <p>POLITICAL</p>	<p>ORGANIZATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • schools are sorting institutions • size⁷ • hierarchical structure⁷ • school culture⁷ • high staff turnover (students report feeling abandoned)² • Grade retention⁴ <p>CURRICULUM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achievement testing • streaming¹¹ • narrow subject orientation⁷ • lack of program/school choice¹ • teaching methods 	<p>STRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minority ethnic background and English as a second language¹ • race and class² • culture <p>FUNCTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dysfunctional family, i.e., divorced, single parent, domestic violence⁸ • material poverty, unemployed father, parents low educational level, parents less involved at school, parents have lower expectations⁵ • weak family supports and social isolation¹ • transient-move frequently¹ 	<p>PSYCHOLOGICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pathologies⁶ • boredom¹⁰ • temperament and behavioral disorders¹ • lack of self-esteem¹ • diseased reasoning⁶ <p>PHYSICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • absence from school⁶ • physical and sensory disorders¹ • developmental and learning related disorders¹ • male gender¹ <p>BEHAVIORAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student's perceptions of irrelevance of education

Social factors	Socioeconomic and political factors	School-related characteristics	Family background/ demographics	Personal characteristics
<p>impoverished communities⁷</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • age segregation (youths spent more time among each other, rather than with people of different ages)¹² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • geographies of exclusion⁷ • going to school in a province where the legal age to leave school is 15 years old⁹ <p>CULTURAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not prepared to have identities ignored or subordinated within discourse of policy framework⁸ • youths challenge dominant forces as intentional and conscious actors, while simultaneously being (im)positioned by social and political ideologies that condition their lives⁸ • media-culture⁷ 	<p>poorly matched to learning styles¹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • academic tracking increases social isolation <p>CLIMATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students do not feel cared for or cared about¹ • teachers are unable to respond adequately and productively to complexities of lives¹³ • not feeling safe i.e. victim of ridicule^{1,13} • negative teacher-student dynamics^{1,7} • teachers hold low expectations for student¹ • scare tactics (forecasting lifetime of “bad” jobs for early leavers may backfire)¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parental attitudes⁴, includes lack of parental support <p>STATUS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having parents education level is at or below high school⁹ • family and welfare issues¹ • family income below recognized poverty level¹ 	<p>to their future¹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • truancy, exclusion, disruptive behavior² • perception of oppression^{1,6} • instances of disruptive behavior⁶ • bad reputation⁶ • poor grades⁶ • fragmented and contingent identities⁸ • working-class rebellion¹¹ • heightened sense of agency⁷ • powerlessness-lack of control over immediate environment or future¹ • belief that socially unacceptable behavior is ok¹ • social immaturity¹ • lack of occupational aspirations¹

Social factors	Socioeconomic and political factors	School-related characteristics	Family background/ demographics	Personal characteristics
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at-risk youths perceived to be low academic achievers and create discipline problems⁴ • not connected to school⁴ • low level of extracurricular participation¹ • having changed schools often⁹ 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • early pregnancy^{1,4} • low ability level¹ • history of low achievement¹ • overworked (greater than 15–20 part-time employment hours per week)¹ • Substance use^{1,4}

¹ Alberta Learning (2001)

² Archer & Yamashita (2003)

³ Ball, Maguire, & Macrae (2000)

⁴ van der Woerd & Cox (2003)

⁵ Dekkers & Claassen (2001)

⁶ Smyth & Hattam (2001)

⁷ Smyth & Hattam (2004)

⁸ Choi (2005)

⁹ Montmarquette & Briot, as cited in Gingras, Bowlby, & Robertson (2000)

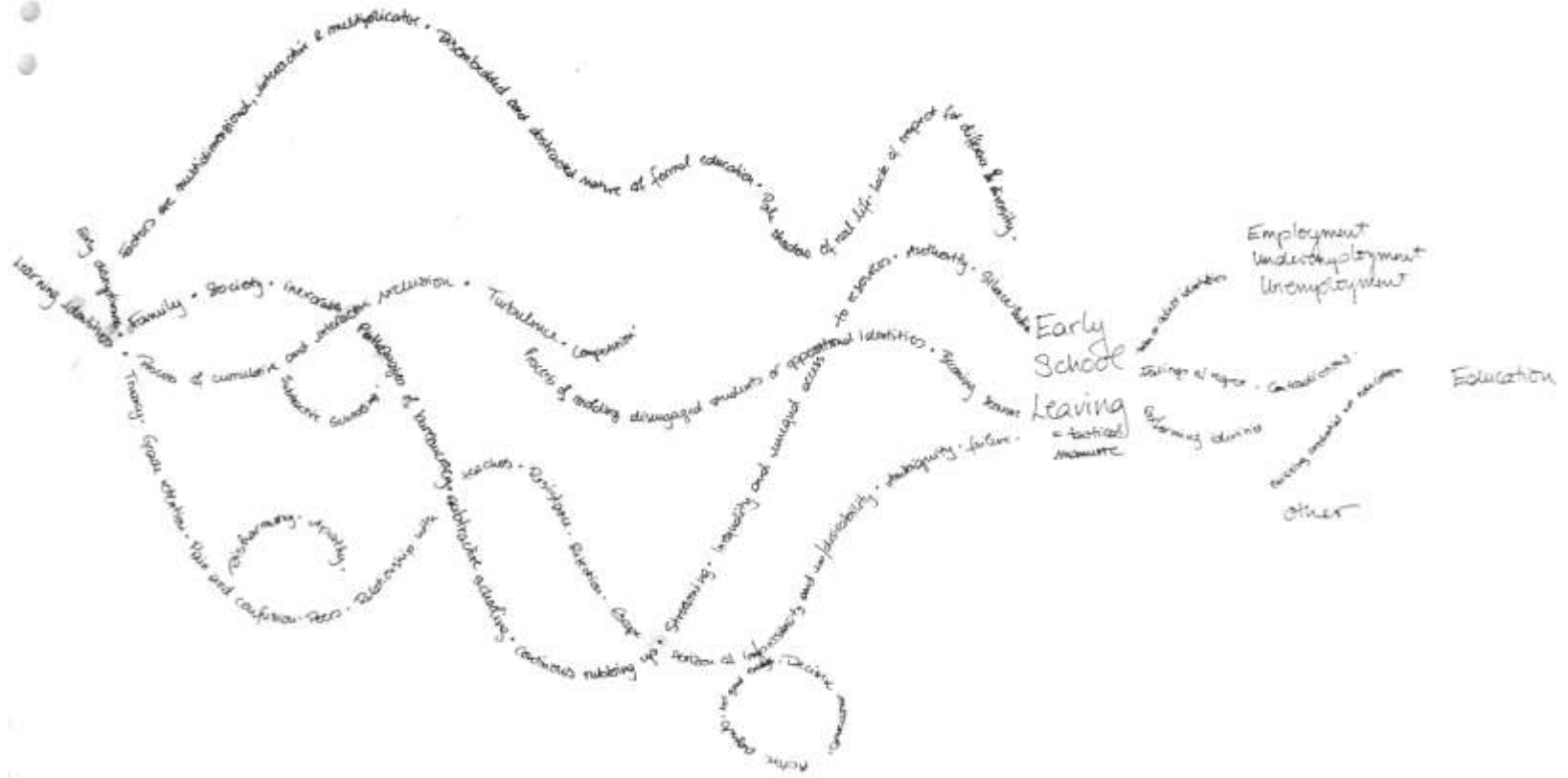
¹⁰ Tanner (2001)

¹¹ Davies & Guppy (2006)

¹² Davies (1999)

¹³ Hattam & Smyth (2003)

APPENDIX B. CRITICAL APPROACHES TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING FLOW CHART



APPENDIX C. RECRUITMENT POSTER

*...So you decided to
quit High School...*
We'd like to hear your story.

- Are you between 18 and 21?
- Have you been out of school for more than 1 year?
- Have you dropped out of an Alberta high school?
- Do you want to tell your story?

We need people like you for research about why young people drop out of high school.

We are researchers at the U of Alberta and the U of Calgary. **We are interested in learning why students dropped out** of high school and how it has impacted lives. **We are here to listen to their stories and to inform schools, governments** and public understandings so that schools can be better places for students. **Identities will be kept confidential.** Researchers take privacy seriously and will do their utmost to protect anonymity in reporting and publication.

*Those interested in participating in our research, please phone
Claire Desrochers or Marion Stewart at:
(780) 492-2290 or e-mail us at earlyschoolleaving@hotmail.com*

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APPENDIX D. RECRUITMENT POSTER

*You know someone who
quit High School?*
We'd like to hear their story.

- Are they between 18 and 21?
- Have they been out of school for more than 1 year?
- Have they dropped out of an Alberta high school?
- Will you ask them if they want to tell their story?

We need your help finding participants for research about why young people drop out of high school.

We are researchers at the U of Alberta and the U of Calgary. **We are interested in learning why students dropped out** of high school and how it has impacted lives. **We are here to listen to their stories and to inform schools, governments and public understandings** so that schools can be better places for students. **Identities will be kept confidential.** Researchers take privacy seriously and will do their utmost to protect anonymity in reporting and publication.

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APPENDIX E. RECRUITMENT LETTER (ENGLISH)

Hello,

My name is Claire Desrochers. For 13 years, I was an elementary school teacher and I loved helping kids learn. Today, I no longer teach but I am very worried about the young people who are unhappy in school and eventually choose to leave before graduating.

I would like to understand why this is happening. That is why a group of researchers and I are working on a project called The Early School Leavers Study. We would like to find 20 young people (between the ages of 18-21) willing to tell us about their experience of leaving high school and how this has affected their life.

I understand you left high school before obtaining your diploma. Would you be willing to help me by participating in this study? Here is what your participation would mean:

- I'd like to meet you 3 or 4 times over the next few months for a 1 to 2 hour conversation at a place and time suitable to you.
- During our meetings, I will not ask you specific questions; I will invite you to tell me about your life experience, in particular what it was like for you in school, how you came to your decision to leave before graduating and how this has affected you.
- I will record our conversations on a digital voice recorder so I can remember what you tell me. I will transcribe each conversation and share it with you so we can be sure I understood you correctly. Everything you share with me will be kept strictly confidential and your name or school information will not be made public.
- Unfortunately, I do not have funds to pay you for participating in this study. But sharing your experience will help my colleagues and me understand why so many youth leave school early. It is our intention to share what we learn with teachers, principals, schools, school boards and universities so that changes can be made to help students feel more comfortable in school.

I am very interested in your story and I really hope you give me the chance to meet you. If you can help me, please call or text me (695-5051) or send me an e-mail (claired@ualberta) as soon as possible. If you have questions or concerns I have not answered in this letter, please contact me; I would be happy to meet with you to answer your questions or provide more information.

Sincerely,

Claire Desrochers
Early School Leavers Study
695-5051
claired@ualberta.ca

APPENDIX F. RECRUITMENT LETTER (FRENCH)

Bonjour,

Je m'appelle Claire Desrochers. Pendant treize ans, j'ai été enseignante dans les écoles. Aujourd'hui, je n'enseigne plus mais je suis très préoccupée par le nombre de jeunes qui quittent l'école secondaire avant d'obtenir leur diplôme.

Je voudrais comprendre ce phénomène de décrochage. Voilà pourquoi je mène, avec quelques collègues, un projet qui s'appelle le Early School Leavers Study. Nous sommes à la recherche de 20 jeunes, âgés de 18 à 21 ans, qui seraient prêts à partager avec nous leur expérience d'avoir quitté l'école.

On m'a dit que tu as quitté l'école avant d'obtenir ton diplôme. Serais-tu prête à m'aider? Voici à quoi ressemblerait ta participation à ce projet :

- Tu accepterais de me rencontrer 3 ou 4 fois pendant les prochains mois pour un entretien d'environ 1 ou 2 heures à l'endroit et l'heure que tu choisiras;
- Pendant ces entretiens, je ne te poserai pas de questions; je t'inviterai plutôt à me raconter ton histoire, c'est-à-dire ton expérience à l'école, ce qui a contribué à ta décision de quitter et les suites de ta décision.
- J'enregistrerai nos conversations afin de pouvoir me rappeler ce que tu me raconteras. Je te montrerai la transcription de chaque conversation afin de confirmer que j'ai bien compris. Tout ce que tu me dis demeurera **complètement confidentiel**; ni ton identité, ni celle de ton école ne sera dévoilée.
- Je n'ai malheureusement pas de fonds pour rémunérer ta participation à ce projet. Mais en partageant ton expérience, tu nous aideras à comprendre pourquoi tant de jeunes quittent l'école avant de terminer. Nous comptons partager nos découvertes avec des enseignants, des directeurs d'école, des conseils scolaires et des écoles de formation afin d'améliorer l'expérience des jeunes tout au long de leur parcours scolaire.

Ton histoire m'intéresse et j'espère bien avoir la chance de faire ta connaissance. Si tu penses pouvoir m'aider, téléphone ou texte-moi au **695-5051** ou encore, envoie-moi un courriel (claired@ualberta.ca) dès que possible. Si tu désires avoir plus de renseignements, ça me ferait plaisir de te les fournir.

Bien sincèrement,

Claire Desrochers
Early School Leavers Study
695-5051/ claired@ualberta.ca

APPENDIX G. LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Letter of Informed Consent

My name is _____, I agree to participate in the research study entitled *A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Early School Leavers*. I understand the purposes of this research are to learn about my life, why I dropped out of high school, and how dropping out of high school has impacted my life. This research aims to include my voice, and the voices of other young adults who have dropped out of school, in informing policy debates and public understandings. I am aware the researchers involved in this study are: Jean Clandinin, George Buck, Pam Steeves, Yi Li, Joy-Ruth Mickelson, Marilyn Huber, Shibao Guo, Yan Guo and Marni Pearce.

I agree to meet 3 times with _____ (name of researcher) in locations that are convenient for me. During each of our meetings, I know we will have a 1-2 hour conversation (specific length of our conversation will be determined by me) which will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I will be given copies of the transcripts. I know the researcher may also collect, construct, and analyze a variety of field texts such as my chronology of life, including school experiences; artifacts such as report cards, class photos and /or other school documents; photographs I have taken from inside and outside of school; and field notes of our interactions. I am aware transcripts and other field texts will be used by the researchers to write journal articles, book chapters and books. I am aware the researchers will also present at local, national, and international conferences. I know that when the researchers write or talk about me, they will not tell my name or provide details through which I can be identified (ie. name of schools I attended, where I live, and so on). I know the researchers will share their writing about me with me prior to it being made public and that I will have the right to ask them to make changes, additions, and deletions.

I understand if photographs and artifacts are used in research texts, they will be altered to ensure my anonymity. I understand the researchers, transcribers, and translators, will fully comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and that each of them has signed a confidentiality agreement to that effect.

The researcher talked with me about this research and answered all my questions. I can choose to not participate in this research and if I choose to participate I can stop at any time without any kind of penalty. I understand if I want further information concerning the study, I can contact Jean Clandinin at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development, University of Alberta at 492-7770 or Ingrid Johnston, Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, at 492-3751. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Name: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____