Composing Lives: Listening and Responding to Marginalized Youth

I lived up to the troublemaker
I was treated differentlyI wanted to change
I proved my teachers wrong and was able to break the stigma
for the first time I enjoyed handing in my work
-Samuel, National Youth in Care Network, 2008[1]

Sometimes the stories we hear write our responses, they bring forth a knowing that our lives are intertwined and that lives are always complex. These responses grow out of a deep listening, a recognition of uncertainty, and a celebration of surprise, which demand that we stay close to the stories we hear. Shifting perspectives in childhood research have moved us away from the objectified status of the child to a view of children and young people as competent social actors who take an active role in sharing their experiences and pose challenges for rethinking the power relationships implicit in many research paradigms.[2] We have listened to youth's stories in our respective research projects – youth who have left school early, youth who have experienced the onset of early psychosis, and youth who are homeless.

In listening to youths talk about their lives, we reflect upon our own lives as we respond and are carried backwards to our own stories. Samuel's story reminds Vera of her own life; it brings forth memories of dropping out of high school. It is the confidence in his voice as he speaks, as he finds his way back into school; it speaks of the possibility of finding voice in a system that too often is disempowering; it is this certainty that leads Vera to inquire more deeply. Who are the people standing beside Samuel as he lives, tells, and retells his story? Where are the openings in our educational system that allowed him to return to school? What are the turning points in his life? These questions bring us back to our own life stories, urging us to inquire more deeply, taking us to a potentially dangerous place – a place sketchy with

forgetfulness, but perhaps much richer in terms of possibilities and inquiry. In listening to stories, we become implicated in a complex ethical relationship, one we can't so easily evade, one in which we as listeners are also positioned as thinkers.

The youth we listened to do not necessarily describe themselves as victims, but as imaginative, creative, and resourceful human beings with social, cultural, and political agency.

School engagement – and particularly disengagement – challenges our perceptions of schooling and our understanding of education by raising questions about meaningful engagement. Decades of research have highlighted that social class, ethnicity, gender, special needs, and sexualities have predicted school disengagement; however, the ways in which youth describe this process is relatively unknown. Rehabilitative educational programs are frequently posited as the solution to reduce these assumed deficits – programs that inherently ignore or minimize the social and economic realities of the daily lives of young people.

We hear marginalized youth described as "deviant, criminals, substance users, culturally impoverished, overtly different, bored and powerless",[3]but it is important to listen to their own stories. The youth we listened to do not necessarily describe themselves as victims, but as imaginative, creative, and resourceful human beings with social, cultural, and political agency.[4] Serena and Shannen Koostachin's voices echo from the screen as they lead a national movement to get a school built in their community, the community of Attawapiskat First Nation:

I would like to talk to you what it is like to be a child who grows up never seeing a real school. I want to tell you about the children who give up hope and start dropping out in Grade 4 or 5. But I want to also tell you about the determination in our community to build a better world. School should be a time for hopes and dreams of the future. Every kid deserves this.[5]

Serena and Shannen spearhead a campaign called Education is a Human Right. Their story reminds us that many life choices are made against a backdrop of imposed social conditions, such as being aboriginal. Both Serena and Shannon leave their makeshift school on the reserve to attend a non-native high school, and in doing so they are forced to move away from their immediate family and community; social, cultural, and institutional narratives are shaping their storied landscape. Understanding the youths' stories as embedded in social contexts leads us to ask questions about the social and political funding structures of schools, yet it also leads us to ask questions similar to McLaughlin's: Whose knowledge counts as school curriculum? How is this knowledge organized? What are the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs that structure school curriculum? What kind of cultural systems does this knowledge work from and legitimate? Whose interests are served by the organization and legitimizing of school curriculum?[6]

Smyth and Hattam argue that the dominant regimes of school leadership within current school reform approaches are failing because of their inability to listen to the voices of students and teachers. They argue that a different "sociological imagination" is required – one that attends to the lifeworlds of young people, is more reflexive of its own agenda, and is sensitive to the broader political context within which "dropping out" is experienced.[7]

By listening to marginalized youths, we ground our knowledge in their lives, accounting for the intersection of representation and identity as well as the multi-faceted mingling of the social, cultural, and psychological elements in their lives. Thus, the stories they tell us are interlocutors of our storying of their

lives; they ask us to engage, to inquire. While we listen to the stories we often imagine, and we remind ourselves to open doors of possibility and, as Greene would say, to break with the ordinary, to look at things as if they could be otherwise.[8] These responses arise from our own situated lives. People hear differently, listen differently – the youth we talk with are not just telling us a good story; they often come to tell because they believe that their stories can awaken us to see more and, to call again upon Greene, to release the imagination, to release the power of empathy, to become more present to those around, perhaps to care. In these moments we can only make sense if we talk out of our own memories with a feeling of commitment and hope.

Young people in these studies are resisting an identity constructed for them by the institution of schooling.

Frank notes that "storytelling is an occasion when people co-author responses to Tolstoy's great question of what shall we do and how shall we live; not permanent answers applicable for the rest of their lives, but the crucial if provisional answers that guide what to do next and how to live now."[9] How do we create stories of school that open benign or inspiring or stimulating possibility? Can we really separate the imaginary from the political or the ethical? Or do we have to weave them together? If we want to think about this, then we have to make openings for many voices, voices that have not been heard.

In our work on early school leaving, we heard the voices of Aboriginal, Francophone, newcomer, second generation immigrant and refugee, third plus generation, visible minority, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered, and rural youth. For example, our consultation with Aboriginal young people provided direction for the content and ordering of the interview protocol itself. These youth indicated the importance of asking about the influence of the residential school system and about their experiences with the Children's Aid Society. They approved of our plan to have youth participants complete the socio-demographic fact sheet after the interview and of having the interviewer review the questions with them. Finally, they indicated a preference for the ordering of questions and prompts in the interview instruments, demonstrating the need to make adaptations for urban aboriginal youth versus rural aboriginal youth.

In further consultations, early school leavers responded positively to probes on issues beyond personal blame for leaving school; they were comfortable with beginning to speak about their everyday lives and working up from there to other levels of influence in home, school, and community; and they also appreciated the use of the term "early school leaver" as opposed to "dropout". Further, many of them did not identify as early school leavers, but as just not in school for now.[10] Smyth notes a number of studies that portray young people as active agents with power rather than passive victims in challenging relational contexts.[11] Young people in these studies are resisting an identity constructed for them by the institution of schooling.

With respect to school disengagement, we have many questions: why do we keep applying standards, achievement tests, curricula? Who makes them up? What do we accomplish by this? How can we install a belief that we can be the best that we could possibly be amidst this? What does it mean to be cheated in life? How do we make human rights and social justice a reality? How can we go on living as if we were untouched by their stories? How can we abdicate our responsibility? We are not talking about transforming the world; this is about honouring what we believe in: that education matters, that schools can be educative, safe, and caring places. It is a recognition that the stories are not only text, but reflections of lives that continue to be lived and that their lives are intertwined with our own.

This relational responsibility, which we carry as narrative inquirers and arts-based researchers, provides us with an approach to understanding experience in our own lives as well. By investigating our storied lives and experiences, we arrive at a narrative vantage point from which we can create a collaborative, reciprocal, and relational process to understand lived and learned experiences of others. Our hope is that we can emphasize inquiry rather than finding final answers or solutions, to reflect upon the diversity of experiences and the continuous unfolding of lives lived. We are engaged in collaborative research, research that is at it is core relational.

In the words of Powers et al, "Although most would agree that one of the overarching goals of education is to promote self-sufficiency and competency among youth, many or most of our own efforts to assist youth have been fairly directive, aimed at providing youth with informational and experiential building blocks upon which they might somehow spontaneously launch their lives after leaving school."[12] These building blocks reflect the dominant social, cultural, and institutional narratives of white, middle class cultures. As Kevlar states "there's always the people who have the perfect lives, the perfect parents […]school is built for them."[13] Our narratives reflect moments in our lives and at times open possibilities to our imaginations, allowing us to create hope and social vision. The significance of the narratives told is therefore not always in the recalling of the experience but in the process of the telling, which gives rise to a kind of embodied theory. This embodiment attends to the relationship between language and the experiencing body and has the capacity to bring the lived experience of individuals to the forefront.

Paying attention to the unfolding of our own lives is an important aspect of trying to understand the experience of others.

We know that many of the youth (as do many of us) impose a linearity and coherence to the unfolding of events, places, and stories that were never part of the lived experiences. In many ways they might have constructed these experiences to emphasize their understanding and the personal significance of their experience. Paying attention to the unfolding of our own lives is an important aspect of trying to understand the experience of others; it is a relational knowing; a recognition that an embodied response is drawn forth within each relationship and within our memories and imaginations. The stories of marginalization on the school landscape thus become embedded in relationships and in places of community.

In studying and understanding experience narratively, we recognize the centrality of relationships, as participants relate and live through stories that speak of their experiences. Throughout this process, we need to remain attentive to ethical tensions, obligations, and responsibilities in our relationships with those who tell, and to address questions of how larger social, institutional, and political narratives inform our understanding and shape youths' stories. Paying attention to these larger narratives enables us to further understand the complexity of the living and telling of stories, to understand the role of both context and relationships.

This is the intersection between the theoretical and our autobiographical coming to know. There is no easy place within any one theory or within any one discipline to see, write, and think about the world; it becomes even more complex, yet necessary, for theory and personal experience to interact and inform one other. As Boer notes, we see that in the process of theorizing that includes self-reflection, one indeed leaves the ontological home to return to the same location, but not quite as the same person.[14] The story of a life is both less than the actual life – because it is selective, partial, contextually

constructed and because the life is not yet over – and more than the life – because its contours and meanings allegorically extend to others. To us, listening to the youth stories is a reminder of becoming: students and teachers becoming, and the possibility of educational becoming. We concur with Thiessen's assertion that "students have both authorship of and authority in their lives at school."[15] In the words of one young student:

More and more people these days, like myself included, we wanna become something. We don't just want to become lawyers and astronauts, and firefighters and all of that. We wanna make a change for the world.

As researchers and citizens, we see it as our responsibility to inquire, alongside and in collaboration with youth. In the telling and retelling of stories, we continuously recognize that lives matter, that each listening brings forth a response, a retelling, and a possibility to shift common plotlines and lives.

EN BREF - Écouter les récits des jeunes nous amène à réfléchir à nos propres expériences vécues, ce qui nous ouvre la possibilité de mieux comprendre la vie qu'ils nous racontent. La signification des récits racontés ne réside pas toujours dans la narration elle-même, mais dans le processus consistant à exposer et à trouver des résonances dans nos vies et dans les réactions aux récits racontés. À titre d'auditeurs, porter attention au déploiement d'une vie devant nous, d'une vie en devenir, nous amène à engager de façon relationnelle avec d'autres et souligne un engagement envers une connaissance relationnelle et contextuelle. S'occuper d'une vie qui se déploie et des résonances dans notre propre vie nous permet d'aller au-delà des catégories, des stéréotypes et des jugements auxquels font face les jeunes marginalisés et de voir ces jeunes comme des êtres imaginatifs, créatifs et ingénieux ayant un ressort social, culturel et politique.

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[1] Samuel's digital story was played at the Marginalized Youth conference in Toronto in the spring of 2009. As part of the conference Vera introduced the youth in person or their stories/videos to the audience. The words of the youth were strong reminders of the importance of our work and form the background of our paper. Samuel's words were arranged as a found poem by Vera, his digital story can be viewed atwww.youtube.com/watch?v=8dTzP56qVjA

[2] M. John, *Children's Rights and Power: Charging up for a New Century*(London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003).

[3] D. Palmer, "Talking About the Problems of Young Nyungars," in*Australian Youth Subculture. On the Margins and in the Mainstream,* ed. R. White (Hobart, Tasmania: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies), 110.

[4] D. J. Clandinin, P. Steeves, Y. Li, J. R. Mickelson, G. Buck, M. Pearce, V. Caine, S. Lessard, C. Desrochers, M. Stewart, and M. Huber,*Composing Lives: A Narrative Account into the Experiences of Youth who Left School Early* (Unpublished manuscript, 2010). Retrieved from:www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/elementaryed/nav03.cfm?nav03=98100&nav02=14050&nav01=14026.

[5] To view their public speaking engagements and to access additional information in the campaign, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=w17r5atzNUI and www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp-TkDv6te0

[6] D. McLaughlin, "Personal Narratives for School Change in Navajo Settings," in *Naming silenced lives. Personal Narratives and Processes of Educational Change*, eds. D. McLaughlin & W. G. Tierney (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[7] J. Smyth and R. Hattam, "Voiced Research as a Sociology for Understanding "Dropping-out" of School, *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 22* (2001): 401-415; J. Smyth and R. Hatta, "Early

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[8] M. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination. Essays on Education, the Art, and Social change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995).
[9] A. Frank, "Why Study People's Stories? The Dialogical Ethics of Narrative Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1, no. 1 (2002), Article 6. Retrieved from http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm/
[10] Clandinin et al.
[11] J. Smyth, *When Students Have 'Relational Power': The School as a Site for Identity Formation around Engagement and School Retention*. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Adelaide, 27-30 November 2006.
[12] L. E. Powers, R. Wilson, J. Matuszewski, A. Phillips, C. Rein, D. Schumacher, and J. Gensert, "Facilitaing Adolescent Self-determination: What Does it Take?" in *Self-determination Across the Life Span: Independence and Choice for People with Disabilities,* eds. D. J. Sands and M. L. Wehmeyer (Baltimore, MD: P.H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1996), 258.
[13] Clandinin et al, 229.
[14] I. E. Boer, *Uncertain Territories. Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*(Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2006).
[15] D. Thiessen, "Researching Student Experiences in Elementary and Secondary School: An Evolving Field of Study," in *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School*, eds. D. Thiessen and A. Cook-Sather (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springerm, 2007), 40.

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