Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in

Anthem – Leonard Cohen

University of Alberta

Exploring students' experiences of arts-based pedagogy:
An a/r/tographical journey

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the Baha'is of Iran who are currently being imprisoned and denied their right to higher education; and to the memory of Sherri Long, an esteemed educator, colleague and friend who passed away suddenly during the completion of this thesis.

Abstract

My research seeks to understand the experience of students who were labeled with learning disabilities and/or behavioural issues and subsequently transferred to an arts-based school. Specifically, I focused on students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy, their willingness to take academic risks and their aspirations for their future. The methods employed to collect the students' stories were one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and an arts-based focus group. My methodology is arts-based. I practice métissage as a/r/tography by weaving together life writing, visual and textual metaphor, and theory and research. The findings of this research suggested that in the arts-based context 1) students feel confidence, hope and aspiration; 2) the students' current arts-based school is a supportive community; and 3) students feel recognition and appreciation of their strengths and efforts. I situate my discussion primarily in the work of Maxine Greene while also drawing on central tenets of constructivism and critical theory.

Preface

The structure of this thesis is not traditional; sections such as the literature review, methodology, methods and theoretical and conceptual frameworks are not dealt with as distinct and isolated chapters. Rather, these traditional sections are woven together, an intentional decision designed to allude to the interdependent nature of this work; a signal that each component is connected, and a reflection that each element exists *in relation* to every other piece. Braided throughout are sections that are best described by what Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo (2009) call life writing. These interludes are moments in my own history, memories that have left their mark. They are moments that I have come to realize have significant bearing on my current understanding, pedagogy, positionality and theorizing; the pieces of life writing found in this project are the roots out of which this thesis has emerged, anchoring me, grounding my understanding and reminding me to return to my own lived experience. There are also intentional pauses in this thesis, marked by artwork I created during my process of information analysis. The artwork itself plays with the metaphor of a maple tree – a metaphor that came to represent: my own physical belonging and rootedness to the land; my childhood and adolescence; relationships and community; ecosystems (both in nature and the school environment); diversity and difference; blurred boundaries; fragmented and holistic pedagogies; repetition and replication; hope and purposefulness. When thinking about the multiple components of this thesis I found Hasebe-Ludt et al.'s (2009) analogy of echolocating (which they use to speak about autobiographical writing) helpful. Echolocation is the process by which bats emit

sound waves, which then bounce off nearby objects and help bats to navigate and situate themselves in relation to their surroundings. Each component of this thesis – the life writing, artwork, student stories, literature review and theory – create their own resonances and "echoes whose vibrations are like lines of connection that guide [my] practice" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 4). Finally, the life writing and artwork also serve to disrupt the notion of linearity. It seemed disingenuous not to allude to the tangled web and circular process that involved reading, creating, reflecting and information gathering from which this thesis emerged.

It is important to take a moment to address some of the language in this thesis. Specifically, I am speaking about terms such as 'disability' and 'at-risk' and my use of 'story'. I am uncomfortable with these terms because they evoke, to me, not only connotations of being less abled or disadvantaged. There is also an aspect of being singled out; we tend to treat individuals with these labels as if they need our benevolent help and support. I posit that, in actuality, we need to revisit our notions of success, ability and the ethical issues related to labeling others as disabled and at-risk. Unfortunately it is not within the scope of this thesis to take these issues up in depth, though these terms and their connotations were at the forefront of my mind while I worked on this project. Disappointingly, the vast majority of the literature I read used the exact terms I object to, or terms with the same connotations, without problematizing them. It became very difficult (impossible) for me to eliminate such language from this thesis because in doing so I would have created a chasm between my work and the work of others who have written about the same population; if I had eliminated what I consider to be

problematic language I would not have been able to draw on the body of literature that presently exists and I would have created a disconnect between my work and the work of others in the same field. I felt that I had to use the language others were familiar with in order to initiate a conversation. To resolve these tensions I decided that I would declare 'labeled with' when speaking about individuals that had been assessed by others as having learning disabilities. This became a way, however subtle, for me to maintain coherence between my work and the literature I was drawing from while distancing myself from the use of the term and signaling that I believe the notion of disability is a categorization (a label) rather than an actual thing or state of being. For the same reasons I tried to not use the term 'at-risk.' Despite these objections and my decision to use 'labeled with' in my own writing, I have not inserted 'labeled with' when drawing on and citing the work of other authors; my objections are put aside, and the integrity and intent of the authors I quote is maintained. Readers of this thesis will also, no doubt, notice that I use the word 'story' frequently; I talk about this work as a story and I refer to the information that the students shared with me as stories. When I speak about stories I am not referring to the 'once upon a time' type of story; rather, I am using 'story' in a broad sense to denote a sharing of experience and or a referencing of a journey.

In an effort to honour the traditions of métissage, a genre of writing and praxis that was pivotal in inspiring how this thesis was constructed, this piece has intentionally been written in a voice that is meant to convey a conversation and conjure the feeling of being spoken to. Although it is clearly not an oral piece, nor

is it being performed, there is an intentional orality infused into it, for orality is a central tenet of métissage as explained to me by Dr. Dwayne Donald (personal communication, November 23, 2012). Finally, as my understandings continue to develop I will no doubt revisit this work with new insights and knowledge. As such, I invite you to approach this piece as Maxine Greene (1995) urges: as incomplete and in process. This work represents my understanding as it is today, but as I continue to engage in the world – in Greene's (1995) words, to name it and act upon it – I hope I will be fortunate enough to continue to nurture my own sense of wonder and curiosity and build upon, with eyes wide open, what I have learned thus far.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the six students who graciously and in the spirit of generosity participated in this research, sharing with me their stories and their time; and to the students' parents whose permission made this research possible. I would also like to acknowledge the administrators, teachers, artists and staff of the Calgary Arts Academy who without hesitation opened their doors to me. The unwavering dedication and love shown by Calgary Arts Academy staff as they tirelessly work to provide a schooling experience that honours each individual student is an inspiration.

To my supervisors and committee. To Dr. Andre Grace for his unwavering support and confidence in me; and Dr. Randy Wimmer whose gentle and constructive guidance and enthusiastic support helped me bring this project from disarray to completion. To Dr. Patti Pente who introduced me to the world of arts-based research – my life and scholarship has been forever changed in ways that I cannot even begin to express; and to Dr. Janice Wallace and Dr. Brenda Spencer for their encouraging smiles in the hallway, their inquiries about my progress and their willingness to answer questions when I appeared unannounced at their office doors.

To my two younger sisters who let me play teacher and boss them around in our childhood games; and to my parents for always supporting my creative, artistic and scholastic endeavours and for making sacrifices so that I could attend an elementary school that nurtured me as I was, taught me to be curious and to love learning. Thank you for believing in me, supporting me, encouraging me to

follow my dreams (even when I vowed that I would never go into education or become a teacher!) and teaching me that it is the journey that is important.

To my colleagues, classmates and friends both near and far, I continue to be grateful for your generosity; for your willingness to listen as I talk through and grapple with ideas out loud, for your willingness to read over and edit work and for your constructive feedback and unwavering support and encouragement.

Finally, thank you to the women from the arts-based research class (I think of you as my personal cheering squad), and to Dr. Miriam Cooley and Dr. Harold Pearse. Your encouragement has nurtured me and given me confidence as an artist and your enthusiastic support of this research gave me motivation to press on when I felt overwhelmed and worried about my decision to choose a path without a map.

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Figure 1: Gel transfer and photography – Maple tree

A Journey Begins

It is often not possible to identify all the significant experiences that have had an impact on and directed one's life journey. Nor is it always easy to recognize events and encounters as significant when we are experiencing them in the moment. However, during our journey, if we take a moment to pause and look around, we can come to understand the particular importance of moments whose imprint still remains with us. As I stand here now I cannot, with absolute certainty, identify which experiences became the nutrients and elements that fostered and nurtured this thesis into existence. I have chosen particularly salient moments to share not because the trajectory of their influence is clear, but because they are memories that have stayed with me like fossils that remain long after the landscape has changed. Like the moments it holds within it, this thesis is also a juncture in a much larger journey; it is as much the story of my emerging (and continually unfolding) understandings and awareness as a researcher, educator and artist as it is a representation of the literature I have read and the information I have gathered. This work not only tells the story of the stories I collected and the work I have read but it also tells the story of *how* I came to my topic and methodology and what I discovered along the way. Motivating me in this research is a desire to understand how the stories we tell students about themselves impacts their perceptions of who they are, what they can achieve and what kind of contribution they can make to their communities. With this research I seek to understand how an arts-based schooling environment influences the stories students tell themselves about who they are as learners. Fundamentally, I want to

learn what can foster learning environments where all students feel a sense of significance, belonging, connectedness to the world around them and the ability to competently assert themselves upon the world in the ways that they desire.

For what seemed like an eternity I was stuck, unable to commit words to paper. The traditional organizational structure of a thesis, which had been suggested for my use, felt forced and contrived. I tried to modify and re-order sections and convince myself that by adding life writing and my own artwork I could 'make it work' but I kept returning to where I began, frustrated and discontent. After a few months of this passed, I realized that I was talking about my research as if I was describing a cold and lifeless object, something abstract and separate from myself; I was not speaking (or writing) from within my research and, for fear of getting it 'wrong' I was not letting my writing reflect the deeply personal, dynamic and emergent nature of my work, writing that Hasebe-Ludt et al., (2009) would describe as relational. I yearned desperately for a way to weave together my own story; the theories I was drawing on and the information I had gathered; and a visual metaphor (my own art-making) all in a manner that brought each strand together harmoniously and honoured each of these three dimensions of my work and identity without favouring one over the other or creating a hierarchy of significance. I realized that if I was going to write a thesis that was reflective of who I was, the ways I came to understand and the ways I expressed my knowledge, without favouring one over the others, I could not write a traditional thesis. It became clear that I needed to find a genre or way of writing that allowed, indeed, encouraged me to unite the fragmented pieces of my

variously lived worlds, only then would I be able to resolve the disconnect I felt towards my work and the writers block I was confronted by (Greene, 1995; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). Métissage (which will be elaborated upon shortly) emerged as the answer; it became the light that helped me find my way out of the dark woods of uncertainty and discontent; it gave me a framework for thinking about the various pieces of my work not as fragments, but as components that were resonant and strengthened by their relationality. Despite this, once I started writing I realized I was practicing what Irwin (2004) calls *a/r/tography as métissage*, something that is distinctly different from the métissage that initially inspired my writing. Let me elaborate.

A/r/t, is according to Irwin (2004), a metaphor for artist-researcher-teacher; a/r/tography, as practice and methodology, integrates these three roles and creates third spaces where openings between artist-researcher-teacher can exist, and where knowing, doing and making coalesce (Irwin, 2004; Leavy, 2009; Pinar, 2004). As Irwin (2004) explains,

> A/r/tography is a form of representation that privileges both text *and* image as they meet with moments of métissage. But most of all, a/r/tography is about each of us living a life of deep meaning through perceptual practices that reveal what was once hidden, create what has never been know, and imagine what we hope to achieve. (p. 10)

Métissage is a genre of writing and a research praxis (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo & Oberg, 2008). The word "métissage" finds its origins in the Latin word *mixtus*, which means mixed, the Greek equivalent of which is

metis. In various colonial contexts, among them Canada's, "métis became a radical category translated as 'mixed-blood,' or 'half-breed' with negative connotations of animals (and humans) breeding across species" (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 142). Essentially, métissage is a praxis; it has been referred to as a political praxis, a reading praxis, a writing praxis and a research praxis (Chambers et al., 2008). It "respects the historical interrelatedness of traditions, collective contexts, and individual circumstances while resisting 19th-century scholarly conventions of discrete disciplines with corresponding rhetorics for conducting and representing research. It is committed to interdisciplinary and the blurring of genres, texts, and identities" (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 142). As I have come to understand it, métissage reclaims the notion of métis or 'mixed', a concept that was once used to evoke shame, and through the blurring of boundaries now communicates the lived stories of people and peoples whose identities are at once complex, multiple and authentically lived. There are a number of people who refer to their work as métissage although each conceptualizes métissage differently. Irwin (2004) practices a/r/tography as métissage and describes it as a metaphor that makes sense of the hyphenated existence often associated with the role of artist-researcher-teachers who feel bound and restricted by conventions and discipline-specific expectations. She explains that métissage "is an act of interdisciplinarity [that] hyphenates, bridges, slashes, and creates other forms of thirdness that provide the space for exploration, translation, and understanding in deeper and more enhanced ways of meaning making" (p. 30). Donald (2011) practices what he calls Indigenous métissage, a braiding together of Aboriginal

identity, artifact and official Canadian history. Hasebe-Ludt et al., (2009) explain métissage as being a "counternarrative" and "an artful research praxis that mixes binaries […] and theory with practice" (p. 9); the locus of which resides in "an inhabited historical place" (p. 37). Although there exists multiple definitions of métissage, they all share a focus on identity and a desire to communicate an authentic story. Hesebe-Ludt further explain that métissage calls those who practice it

> to create an aesthetic product that combines disparate elements without collapsing or erasing difference. The act of creating new mixed forms, stronger and more resilient than the existing ones, gives métissage its generativity in the face of differences and thus its power to reconfigure the past, to transform the present, and to imagine otherwise. (Rushdie, 1991, in Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009)

In my work I have been inspired by métissage as defined by Hasebe-Ludt et al., (2009), however as I tried to use it in my thesis I came to realize that I was inadvertently practicing a/r/tography as métissage[1] as conceptualized by Irwin (2004). I encountered a/r/tography over a year ago and struggled to understand it; at the time, I found it abstract and difficult to comprehend (a reflection of my own scholarship and not of Irwin's work). The notion of a third space was troublesome for me; I desired something that, for lack of a better word, had weight; something that was rooted and grounded somewhere, or in something. After experiencing an

[1] For the sake of clarity, from this point onward a/r/tography will refer to a/r/tography as métissage (Irwin, 2004), and métissage will refer to the work of Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009).

inspiring performance of métissage I decided to explore its application to my work and writing. I pursued conversations with Dr. Dwayne Donald and read Hasebe-Ludt et al.'s, (2009) book *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times*. What resonated with me was the visual image of a braid and the explanation that métissage was a praxis *rooted* in place and history. As I thought about this I came to realize how I could anchor this work and ground it in my own sense of belonging.

Through the process of learning about métissage, I came to understand my own relation to a/r/tography and how I could make a/r/tography comfortable for me. Only at this point was I able to go back to Irwin (2004) and begin to more concretely appreciate and comprehend the practice of a/r/tography and see its relationship to my own work. Although Hasebe-Ludt et al.'s (2009) description of métissage created an entry point for me, and a framework that helped me begin writing, I cannot claim that this thesis is the métissage they speak of, write and practice. Although my work is grounded in place and history, I do not "interrogate difference as inherited from colonization and globalization and as sedimented in socio-historical formations such as language, nation, class, and race" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 35). Thus, I acknowledge the influence that Hasebe-Ludt et al.'s (2009) work has had on me, while I signal my departure from it. If I claimed that I was doing métissage as they described and modeled it, I do not believe I would be honouring their intentions. What I am taking from their work and applying to my own is the notion of rootedness: the idea that métissage as a praxis is grounded. It was only after I felt rooted that I was able to find my own voice

and embark on the writing of this thesis; and this realization I attribute to métissage. Through the process of coming to understand how my work, practice and writing related to both métissage and a/r/tography, I came to realize that although I am rejecting the notion that I am occupying a third space (a space traditionally inhabited by a/r/tographers), I am weaving together research about both self and other (researcher), theory through the lens of classroom experience (teacher), and metaphors both visual and textual (artist). Thus this thesis is a work of *métissage as a/r/tography*.

The journey that led me to discover that I was engaging in a/r/tography was an important one. It helped me enter into my writing, find my voice and have the confidence to tell my own story within the confines of this thesis and in a way that felt genuine and authentic. Yet this journey did not start with métissage; indeed, if we trace its lineage we find ourselves among notions of creative and embodied ways of knowing, learning and understanding and immersed in the research process. It was the exercise of grappling with and coming to understand how I engage with the world that I was able to comprehend how I come to know, understand and make sense of my experiences, identity and the stories of others. An elaboration of this process whereby I engaged myself in the research process (known more commonly as one's methodology) will follow.

Ways of Learning, Doing and Understanding Research

My methodology is arts-based, by which I mean rooted in creative and embodied ways of knowing and doing. When I embarked on this work, the notion of embodiment did not occupy my consciousness concurrently with thoughts about my own practice. Initially my intention was to ground my work in an arts-based methodology and, although I found it intriguing, embodiment was something other people wrote about and performed; I did not think it was connected to my own work and process. During the information analysis phase of my thesis I participated in an immersive studio art course and used the experience to visually think through and explore the information I had gathered. As I did so I realized that my moments of clarity and focus all came when I was physically engaged in repetitive tasks (motions) that did not require my mind to be focused on what I was doing. It was during the many hours I spent carving linoleum tiles, etching Plexiglas, turning the printing press, or brushing, scraping and rubbing paper as I made gel transfers (all tasks that required repetitive motion), that I slowly began to realize that these tasks cultivated deep understanding. My thoughts that had previously been fragmented began to consolidate, become synthesized and turn into the understandings I now share with you; as I engaged in these tasks I began to move from understandings that were disjointed and specific to a more global and holistic appreciation, one in which learning in different areas became unified and integrated. As my awareness of the connection between involving my body, repetitive physical motions, and my increased clarity grew, I began to purposefully walk to and from school in an effort to cultivate a daily routine

where I could process my learning in a way that involved my body. This was especially important after my art course finished and I began the writing process which was predominantly stationary computer work. Not surprisingly, it was during these walks that my mind was most clear, my understanding most acute and the connections between isolated and sometimes abstract topics became realized, grounded and concrete. Thus walking the same path every day, always simultaneously present to the sensations of the wind, sun, rain or snow on my face and my body while lost in my thoughts, I consciously welcomed an embodied practice into my process. For the remainder of the writing of my thesis it was when I physically engaged my body in repetitive motion, motion that did not involve thinking about what I was doing (walking the same bike path where I did not need to worry about cars or intersections) that my knowledge and understandings settled and moved from the shadowy forests of my mind and took shape in my consciousness. Thus, an embodied methodology became integral to the progression of my work. Walking became a way for me to honour my own embodied wisdom, that is, the knowledge I held within myself, knowledge that became manifest through movement. As I have come to know it, we are made aware of our own embodied wisdom when intuitive feelings are honoured and become articulable[2].

My understanding of embodiment is informed by Hocking, Haskell and Linds (2001), who attest that embodiment refers to "the integration of the physical or biological body and the phenomenal or experiential body" (Varela, Thompson,

[2] For a photo journey of my embodied practice see Appendix.

& Rosch, 1991 in Hocking, Haskell & Linds, 2001, p. xviii), further explaining that it is "a seamless though often elusive matrix of bodymind world, a web that integrates thinking, being, and doing and interacting within worlds" (Hocking et al., 2001, p. xviii). Embodiment, conceptualized in this way, is a move away from the notion that knowing and knowledge "are concrete things that reside in the body or mind" (Hocking et al., 2001, p. xviii). When I think of embodiment in this way I'm reminded of words written by Maxine Greene (1973):

> to identify oneself with a one-dimensional view is always to deny a part of one's humanity. It takes at least what the poet William Blake once described as a fourfold vision – derived from feeling, sensation, and intuition as well as mind – to encompass one's experience adequately and humanly. (p. 9)

In order to encompass my own experiences and realize the understandings that were residing in the realm between my conscious and unconscious mind, I welcomed feeling and sensation, along with movement, into my practice.

Arts-based research, although still a relatively new practice, is garnering increased recognition as a methodology (Greenwood, 2012). Although my information collection process employed arts-based methods, use of the arts in my research extended far beyond the art activities I asked my participants to take part in. I employed the arts as a tool to delve deeper into and explore the themes that had emerged from the information I had collected. Using the arts in this way gave me a means by and through which I could employ a methodology that was holistic, welcoming of my emerging identity as a researcher, artist and teacher and in harmony with my epistemic and ontological orientations (Leavy, 2009). The

methodology of arts-based research offered me not only a new way to think about research but also a new way to *do* research. Arts-based research provided a way for me to create a welcomed space for wholeness in my work. Like those who pioneered arts-based research I too sought a way to "sculpt engaged, holistic, passionate research" and a methodology that gave me permission to share my relationship with and to my work and articulate that relationship for myself and my audience in an artful manner (p. 2). This methodology allowed me to create space where I could simultaneously be a researcher, artist and educator and harmoniously wed my identity with both theory and practice. Although arts-based research can be used in all stages of one's research, it featured most prominently in my information analysis and writing (from decisions about how I constructed the written text to the words I chose to articulate the ideas therein). It also influenced the methods by which I collected information.

As a methodology that, according to Leavy (2009), promoted wholeness, relationality, and artful ways of knowing, coming to know and expressing arts-based research gave me courage and permission to bring myself into my writing and research in a conscientious and mindful way. Additionally it gave me license to break with tradition and organize my writing in a manner that I felt told my research story the best, the outcome of which became a blurring of boundaries between theory, practice and narrative. Arts-based research also seemed to be a comfortable fit when I considered the context that I was researching and the question I set out to explore. My research sought to understand the experience of students who had been labeled with learning disabilities or behavioural 'issues'

while at school and then transferred to an arts-based charter school where their labels were ignored. Specifically I focused on the students' sense of belonging at school, their sense of self-efficacy, their willingness to take risks in front of their peers, and their aspirations for their future. Because my questions were open-ended, and I sought to understand experiences within an arts-based education context, it was logical that I use a methodology that "invoke[d] multi-dimensional responses" (Greenwood, 2012, p. 2) and honoured multiple (and artful) ways of knowing and expressing (Greenwood, 2012).

There are many forms of arts-based research, indeed it is a rapidly growing methodology; expanding not only in the number of people practicing it but also in the modalities being used to conduct and express research (Leavy, 2009). At the outset I did not intend to use a/r/tography but, as I thought and wrote about my process and my relationship to my work, I realized I was entangled in a/r/tography; my work was grounded in my experience as a teacher which was informed by my life as a student, and I was coming to know my topic, the students' stories and myself better through my research and art-making. To deny the equally significant and reciprocal roles of artist, teacher and researcher, as well as of writing, creating, and questioning, would be to misrepresent the methodology that had become the foundation upon which I was standing.

Now is an opportune time to elaborate on a/r/tography. A/r/tography is a living practice that both requires and spurs us to conscientious awareness and living. Irwin (2004) describes it thus: "to live the life of an artist who is also a researcher and teacher is to live a life of awareness, a life that permits openness to

the complexity around us, a life that intentionally sets out to perceive things differently" (p. 33). It is a practice where one's work as an artist, researcher and teacher coalesce and find expression through the privileging of both text and image; it is a space for life writing, where "questions, practices, emergent understandings and creative texts" find representation (Irwin, 2004). This practices involves creating and recreating where "thought and action are inextricably linked, and through a hermeneutic circle of interpretation and understanding, new knowledge affects existing knowledge that in turn affects the freshly conceived existing knowledge" (pp. 33-34). Irwin refers to the cycle of learning where knowledge and understanding are being constantly revisited and built upon, each time creating new understandings and insights as the "hermeneutic circle of interpretation and understanding" (pp. 33-34). While acknowledging that I know very little about the longstanding tradition of hermeneutics and honouring the unease that comes with speaking about something I am only vaguely familiar with, I am going to refer to the cycle of learning that Irwin has described above as the a/r/tographical cycle; I do this because learning in this cyclical way is something I have experienced while engaged in a/r/tography. As I have come to know it, this a/r/tographical cycle is a process that embraces emerging understandings; it is a cycle I have come to know as my own practice has unfolded. In the course of this research – particularly during the writing stage – I circled back to previous questions and insights on numerous occasions, building upon them and creating new or deeper knowledge as I did so. The realization that I was doing a/r/tography came from one such

circling and, as I came to welcome and understand that it had been an integral part of my process, I was reminded of a comment by Greene (1973): “few conceive knowing as passive or merely contemplative. It is an active process carried on by a knower; and, each time it occurs, it culminates in something known” (p. 121). A helpful way to think about these connected and multiple aspects of my methodology (embodiment, theory, practice, narrative; creating, art-making, questioning, emergent understanding; and being artist, teacher and researcher) is to liken them to the metaphor of the rhizome, which is used by Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong and Bickel (2006). A rhizome is a tangle of roots with no clear beginning or end. It can represent interconnectedness and multiple points of entry (Irwin et al., 2006). To extend this idea further, a rhizomatic relationality “affects how we understand theory and practice, product and process. Theory is no longer an abstract concept but rather an embodied living inquiry, an interstitial relational space for creating, teaching, learning, and researching in a constant state of becoming” (Irwin et al., 2006, p. 71). Thus, the aspects of my thesis mentioned above are not distinct from one another but can be viewed as an entangled, living rhizome. It is through the a/r/tographical process (through questioning, writing, creating, living as artist/teacher/researcher and circling back through each time to deepen and expand my understanding) that this thesis emerged and took shape. A/r/tography gave me permission to weave together my own narrative, the experiences the participants shared with me, and the literature I read, remaining, as I did so, active and aware, conscious that the entire process was an act of personal research.

Contextualizing the Research – Part One

Theoretical Orientation

One way to make sense of my journey and understand the ground upon which I now stand is to look at my experiences through the lens of theory. Each theory prompts me to gaze upon my work from a particular vantage point, helping me to make sense of the world. I found that a singular theory could not adequately address and honour my beliefs, ways of knowing and orientation (epistemology and ontology) while speaking directly to the issues and themes I was researching and the questions I had. Most helpful was the work of Maxine Greene, a remarkable philosopher, educator, and feminist whose work never ceases to inspire me and give me hope. Greene is an ardent supporter of the arts generally as well as arts education particularly, and her work seamlessly marries critical theory and constructivism, both of which I've been drawn to in my own scholarship. Although these attributes I've just listed would be reason enough to use her work as my theoretical foundation, Greene seemed especially appropriate for two additional reasons. She unapologetically and without justification supports her theoretical and philosophic thinking by drawing from multiple artworks, including novels, poetry, dance, music, visual and theatre, treating them (as I too believe they should be treated) as academically rigorous and legitimate in an academic environment (specifically within the discipline of philosophy), which has not traditionally been a welcoming place for the arts. Second, Greene is a fiercely independent thinker and pioneer who models her pedagogy and speaks out to name her world even when she stands alone doing it. Through her work and

the example she sets, Greene challenges and questions the status quo and asks us to passionately work for the possible and for things to be otherwise than they presently are (Greene, 1995). As I worked through the various components of this thesis I found myself approaching my work as a response to this call to action. This thesis is an offering of hope and a tiny step towards the possible, the yet to be.

The questions Greene poses and her approach to the world are indicative of a critical-constructivist sensibility (though whether she would call herself a critical-constructivist I do not know). It is important to take a minute here to delve more deeply into critical theory and constructivism since they root and anchor both my work and that of Greene's; both frameworks will be explored in relation to the work of this thesis.

Critical theory provided a way for me to think about the labeling and categorization of students that I had experienced and witnessed both in childhood and in my professional life. It did not give me answers or solutions; rather, the critiques it offered and the questions posed by critical pedagogues offered a way for me to think about and orient myself in my experiences and make sense of my observations. The tradition of critical pedagogy can be traced back to the Institute für Sozialforschung (more recently known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) in Germany before WWII (McLaren, 1998). In North America today, those who are inspired by the Frankfurt School are bringing critical theory to social research and the disciplines of "literacy criticism, anthropology, sociology and educational theory" (p. 163). There is no single set of ideas that characterizes

critical theory, but there are a number of objectives that unite the work of critical theorists. These objectives are "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices" (pp. 163-164). To this end, critical theorists working in the realm of education most often concern themselves with issues related to politics, culture and economics and their manifestation within our school systems through dominant power structures; the relationship between power and knowledge is of the utmost concern (McLaren, 1998). In this light, schooling is seen as a political enterprise and a cultural arena, and the following two aspects of its functioning are scrutinized: the use of schools as mechanisms for sorting individuals and constructing learning opportunities that favour on the basis of gender, race and class; and schools' potential to foster agency and empower individuals. Critical theorists argue that teachers must understand and appreciate the relationship between knowledge and power so that they can use their power to foster "critical and active citizens" (p. 164). Theorists such as Freire, Giroux and McLaren distinguish between schooling and education, explaining that the former is concerned with control (power) and the latter situates the learner as an active participant who has the ability to transform society through her own empowerment. As McLaren explains, "critical theorists see schooling as a form of *cultural politics;* schooling always represents an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of school life" (p. 164). From an economic standpoint, critical theorists oppose the notions that students are fodder for economic prosperity and success is measured by the degree to which students become a "compliant, productive and patriotic

[workforce]" (p. 165). One of the ways in which society remains stratified and faulty notions of success are imparted and perpetuated is through standardized curriculum and textbooks. A school curriculum, from the perspective of a critical theorist,

> represents the *introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society.* The curriculum favors certain forms of knowledge over others and affirms dreams, desires, and values of select groups of students over other groups. (McLaren, 1998, p. 186)

When addressing issues related to curriculum, critical theorists tend to focus their attention on the hidden curriculum, or "the tacit ways in which knowledge and behaviour get constructed, outside the usual course materials and formally scheduled lessons" (McLaren, 1998, p. 187). The literature on critical pedagogy encouraged me to interrogate what Crotty (1998) describes as societies "commonly held values and assumptions" (p. 157) about learning and to think deeply about what the consequences are for students when we test them and label them after deciding that they learn too slowly, or too differently, or because they act in ways that challenge commonly held views about what 'acceptable' and 'normal' behaviour is. Prompted particularly by Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009), I began to wonder: what happens to students' sense of self-efficacy and sense of belonging when they feel compelled to keep up with or fit in with the status quo and struggle to do so? What would happen if we were to create an environment of questions-posing and multiple solutions rather than singular

(right) answers, an environment that fostered dialogical interactions and enforced the idea that both teachers and students had something to contribute and learn?

Though in my reading of critical theory I have not come across a theorist that attends to the issue of learning disabilities, I do not believe it is outside the scope of critical theory if I extend the concern about justice, equity and the hidden curriculum beyond issues of race, class, culture, power, gender and sexual orientation to that of learning disabilities. Let me explain: I think it is safe to assume that most people would agree that all students *can* learn. Those labeled with learning disabilities may have trouble articulating their knowledge or absorbing information in a manner deemed 'normal,' but I posit that most educators would agree that they *can* learn (the extent or complexity of what they can learn might be debatable). When we label students with a learning disability, we essentially impose 'our way' upon them. Instead of honouring how they learn and challenging them to develop their skills and knowledge, we force remediation upon them in an effort to help them succeed by our definition of success. When we do this, we devalue their innate learning styles and, by extension, we devalue who they are. The views and questions expressed above, when combined with constructivism, inform the lens through which I view my research.

My experience of being tested for learning disabilities throughout my childhood and adolescence and having been given different diagnoses on different occasions has prompted me as a teacher and graduate student to question the notion of disability as it relates to learning. I wondered what the benefits and disadvantages were of testing and labeling a student. On one hand, I believe it can

be very empowering to know how your brain works (knowledge that is sometimes disclosed concurrently with a diagnosis of a learning disability). This knowledge can enable an individual to advocate for themselves and approach tasks in a manner that will foster their greatest success. However, as we will see later on, the diagnosis of learning disabilities most often results in students being pathologized and seen through the lens of their deficits. Unfortunately, rarely are students who are labeled with learning disabilities approached as having unique strengths that others can learn from. Instead, we offer them remediation and supports, the goal being to demonstrate their knowledge in ways we have deemed legitimate. My experiences, as well as what I witnessed as an educator, led me to believe that learning disabilities are constructs, imposed upon children and youth because their way of learning, understanding, and expressing their knowledge does not fit with normative ideas about what learning *should* look like. I believe McLaren (1998) would attest that the criteria for what learning should look like are determined by the hegemonic ideology. Critical pedagogy helped me frame these experiences and observations, leading me to understand how notions of success and normality are propagated by the dominant power of the day and legitimized via mandated curriculum and classroom resources, standardized testing and teaching practices as well as legislation. These awarenesses were unearthed as I delved into critical theory and began to shape convictions I now hold – convictions that have become part of my pedagogy. These convictions led me to constructivism, a theoretical approach that postulates that knowledge, and by extension reality, is constructed by individuals through social interaction; meanings are made vis-à-vis the

interplay between subject and object and "constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). This approach to knowledge considers the important role played by social interactions and engagement with the world by individuals. The emphasis on social interactions prompted me to think about school communities and the impacts that school climates have on the experience of students. I began to wonder how the students I was going to be working with experienced school. I was also curious about whether or not (in the specific arts-based environment I was studying) the students felt that their ways of knowing, learning and expressing were appreciated, encouraged, fostered and validated.

At its core, constructivism is essentially "a theory about knowledge and learning" (Fosnot, 2005, p. ix). It gives us a framework for understanding how individuals know and come to know. It postulates that knowledge is not absolute but rather emergent and constructed by individuals as they collectively question, reflect, justify, engage and interpret. Constructivism did not emerge from within a single discipline; indeed constructivist principles can be found in the areas of psychology, philosophy, the cognitive sciences and biology. When applied to education, constructivism does not provide a set of how-to strategies for teaching, it outlines some general principles that, when taken into consideration, can inform pedagogical practices. What follows is a brief account of some of those principles as outlined by Fosnot and Perry (2005).

1) Learning takes place when students are invited to raise and ask their own questions, when they are given space to generate and test the answers they

come to for themselves and when they are encouraged to discuss their findings in a community of other learners. From this perspective "learning is not the result of development; it *is* development" (p. 33);

2) Errors, challenges and contradictions should be embraced because "disequilibrium facilitates learning" (p. 34). Learning opportunities in which students can meaningfully explore, in realistic contexts and through open-ended activities, multiple possibilities "both affirming and contradictory," should be offered to students (p. 34);

3) Reflection is an important part of the learning process. It helps students organize their ideas as well as build on previous learning and experiences; "reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning" (p. 34). Reflections can take multiple forms (written, drawn etc). Discussing personal reflections within a learning community can help students make connections to previous learning and develop strategies for problem-solving.

4) "Dialogue within a community engenders further thinking" (p. 34). Students need to come to view their classroom as a learning community where everyone takes part in (and is responsible for) "defending, proving, justifying, and communicating their ideas" (p. 34). With this understanding we must ask ourselves what opportunities are we providing for students to engage in a respectfully discursive environment, and environment where challenges are seen as learning opportunities.

When we label students with a learning disability (and thus tell them that there is something wrong with how they learn), are we creating a welcoming

space in which they feel safe expressing their understandings and making what some might call mistakes?

The approach I take to constructivism is akin to Greene's. Following her lead, I situate myself more in the realm of philosophy than cognitive psychology; constructivism, when gazed upon from this vantage point, is "to refuse the notion of an objectively meaningful world, as it is to refuse visions of a self-sufficiently and idealized 'real.' It is to challenge familiar dualism and either/ors that have haunted cognition over the centuries" (Greene, 2005, p. 110). This approach embraces what Greene (2005) calls the "currents of thought" (p. 111) that date back to the age of romanticism, streams and rivers that have coalesced over the years and become what we now refer to as constructivism. Some of these streams have been concerned with consciousness, with the human mind and the part it plays in sense-making. All have "clustered into an attack on objectivity, on instrumental rationality, on disembodied abstract ways of defining meaning – against a usually empty sky. Existentialism, phenomenology, interpretivism, experientialism, certain modes of idealism: These have been the sources of constructivist thinking" (p. 111). Meaning, Greene (2005) postulates, is made through encounters. We must then ask, what opportunities are we giving our students to engage in various encounters? Many practitioners believe that students labeled with learning disabilities benefit most from, or "*require* teacher-directed, fragmented, skills-based instruction" (Reid & Valle, 2005, p. 155). When these teaching methods are employed, how are we creating opportunities for students to have encounters? How are we providing space where students can make meaning

for themselves? Works of fiction, poetry, theatre, music, visual art, provide rich opportunities for students to encounter worlds other than their own, to place themselves in the shoes of others, and think about how they are going to articulate these worlds to those around them. Greene (2005) articulates it thus:

> Lending her life, for example, to Hamlet or Ophelia in bringing their illusioned world into existence, the reader is reshaping her own experience, making connections, opening perspectives, and, by so doing, making meaning by constructing a new 'reality' that in time will reconstruct her own. (p. 112)

If we take it as true that learning is subjective, active, constructed through encounters and something that individuals have to carry out for themselves, then we must be ardently concerned with our pedagogies and the plight of all students, especially those who are currently being told they have disabilities because they learn differently. We must strive to build classrooms where opportunities to construct knowledge abound. Unfortunately this is not the reality for the students whom society has decided do not learn properly. Constructivist methods have traditionally been used only with students that are viewed as 'normal' or gifted learners, and teacher-directed, "drill-and-practice instructional methods" are used with those students who have difficulty learning (Reid & Valle, 2005, pg. 150). This represents a grave injustice, and it is this injustice that spurs me on in this research, as does the experience of seeing students who were taught via these teacher-directed and drill-oriented methods thrive and prosper in an arts-based

environment where they could construct knowledge for themselves via encounters with the arts.

Engagement with the world is an important component of arts-based pedagogy. When students are asked to create artwork or engage with a piece already created, they are being asked to engage critically with the world around them through a strong sense of materiality. Through playing with possibilities, and thinking about what could be, students are given the opportunity to explore the complexities of the world in a constructive space. Consequently, in these spaces, students' imaginations are nurtured and they are encouraged to think in terms of possibilities, and "relationships between and among things" (Eisner, 2002 p. 19) are also highlighted and explored. "In the practice of critical pedagogy, dialogue and analysis serve as the foundation for reflection and action" (Darder et al. 2009, 13), and it is through the creation of these creative spaces that meaningful dialogue can happen within a classroom context (Addison, 2010). Thus, it is through a pedagogy that combines elements of both constructivism and critical theory that I believe the needs of all students will be best served.

Another central topic in this thesis is the idea of learning disabilities. This topic will be addressed in due course, but it seems fitting to take a moment to discuss the notion of disability (and particularly learning disabilities) from a critical-constructivist perspective. Dudley-Marling (2004) asserts that learning disabilities are viewed through what he calls a 'technical gaze.' That is, there seems to be a taken-for-granted assumption among the majority of scholars and practitioners in the field of learning disabilities or special education that learning

disabilities are a "pathology that resides *in the heads* of the individual" (Read & Valle, in Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 482). Rather than question the origins of the field of learning disabilities, let us acknowledge that its roots reside in the medical and psychological disciplines, and experts in these fields have spent significant time and resources "attempting to pinpoint [the] cause of [learning disabilities] with the hope that technical remedies for persistent learning problems can be discovered" (Swadener, 1995 in Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 482).

The influence of the medical and psychological disciplines, combined with our society's propensity for individualism – which is perpetuated through our school systems – have led many to believe that success and failure "can usually be traced to individual effort and ability" (Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 483). If we do not question the orientation that failure is the students rather than the schools responsibility then it is easy to find ourselves thinking "what's wrong with Johnny?" rather than "What's wrong with an institution that produces so much failure?" along with the corollary, "What's wrong with a culture that created an institution that creates so much failure?" (p. 483). Essentially, learning disabilities are being used as a scapegoat, offering a convenient excuse that legitimizes school failures by placing the responsibility for learning challenges upon students (Dudley-Marling, 2004).

According to Dudley-Marling (2004), one constructivist who takes up the idea of disabilities, learning disabilities are performed or enacted and based on the negotiation of institutional frameworks and social contexts. Shyness and smartness for example can only exist in relation to others who make these traits

salient. In other words, would someone be considered shy if there was no one around with whom they could be shy? Thus, identity is not only produced within a social context, "it is itself part of the context that gives meaning to participants' actions," and it is based upon interactions between people in particular environments while they engage in activities (p. 485). Therefore, constructivists argue that we cannot separate individual actions from the contexts within which the actions take place. Thus, when addressing learning differences and difficulties we must ask broad questions such as "what's going on here?" (p. 488). It is important to note that a constructivist approach does not mean that learning difficulties are ignored; they are simply addressed from a different perspective that considers how meanings, identities, skills and behaviours are constructed in relation to social contexts and institutional structures.

In my reading of critical theory and constructivism I found that the two could be married well, forming what I refer to as critical-constructivism, to address the questions and experiences that were driving my research. However, in choosing to combine and work with these two theories, I also wanted to think about their applicability to the context and students I was researching. When I applied theories of constructivism to the Calgary Arts Academy[3], the institution where I conducted my research and a school where students learn core curriculum subjects through engaging in various art forms, I discovered that constructivist ideals and the school's pedagogy reinforced each other well. Learning through the arts (as the students at the Calgary Arts Academy do) demands personal

[3] Permission has been given to name the Calgary Arts Academy in this thesis.

engagement on the part of each student. Students are often required to relate to a piece of art or create artistic pieces that demonstrate learning in a core curriculum subject. As they learn in this way, as they engage, relating to their own artwork and the artwork of others, I speculate that they are creating a community of learning that is social and respectful of individual understandings and knowledge construction. The pivotal question that must be asked, then, becomes, is this community a reality for students or an ideal? Although this question is not explicitly addressed in my research, my findings suggest that at the Calgary Arts Academy this community does indeed exist, at least for the group of students I worked with. These findings will of course be taken up in more detail later on.

A memory about embodied ways of learning and a teacher whose pedagogical convictions triumphed over a group of unenthusiastic students…

It was a cold winter day. The snow was deep, heavy, wet; the sky grey and oppressive. Carefully, one foot in front of the other, my grade five class waded into the middle of the field, careful to disturb as little snow as possible. Leaving us to stand huddled together, cold, complaining and unenthused about having to be outside, our teacher took a few more paces and then turned to us. Standing in place and holding fast to one end of a long thick rope, she threw the other end to a classmate and instructed them to walk and, as they did so, keep the rope taut without pulling her from her place. As they took one step and then another we all soon realized a circle was in the making. We each took a turn, and with each go-around we wore the snow further and further down, compacting it with every reluctant cold step. In the end, we had an (almost) perfect circle made from our footprints. That day we learned that sometimes, just sometimes on rare occasions, risking your 'cool status' by not wearing a hat or mitts and not zipping up your winter jacket just isn't worth suffering because your teacher is just as stubborn as you are and is going to make you go outside anyways. We also learnt, with the aid of the deep snow and our collective footprints, how a geometric compass works.

A memory about the ambiguity of labels and the impact of the stories we tell ourselves…

At some point during the first month of my undergraduate degree I found the Student Support office and explained to them that in high school I had been diagnosed with learning disabilities. I inquired about the possibility of being afforded extra time to write my exams (like I had received in high school). They asked me to send them a copy of the test results that indicated that I had a learning disability. When we contacted my high school we found out that the tests that they had administered were not the ones that my university used. They suggested that I get retested and while the tests were being administered I would receive extra time. It took all year to finish the tests because they were administered piecemeal, as I had time. When the results came back I was told I did not have a learning disability, the verdict was that I was lower than average in a few areas and around average in other areas; but I was not low enough in the right number of areas to receive a diagnosis and, consequently, from that point onward, I would no longer be able to access support from that office and I would no longer qualify for extra time on my exams. That first exam I took without extra time was one of the hardest experiences of my life. I thought my racing heart was going to break through the cage of my ribs. The anxiety that I felt was almost debilitating; my only goal was to make it to the end of the exam without passing out. I was fully prepared to fail the exam and take the course over. I told myself that just attempting the exam was a feat to be proud of. I ended up passing the exam and doing well in the course. After receiving my grade I remember being perplexed; I felt sadness that I had previously underestimated myself and assumed I was not capable of writing exams well under 'normal' circumstances.

Figure 2: Acetone transfers – Collecting sap
& Linoleum embossed prints with watercolour – New growth

SUMMER

Contextualizing The Research – Part Two

Inspired research: Background

When I taught at the Calgary Arts Academy I taught middle school students, grades 5 and 9 (between 11 and 15 years old). It was my students who prompted me to pursue my master's degree and inspired my thesis research topic. I wanted to make sense of what I was seeing everyday in the classroom so, when I designed my research project I decided to work with students at the middle school where I had previously taught. I had a positive relationship with the administrators and staff, and I was familiar with the environment and many of the students. My decision to focus on junior high students was motivated by a desire to explore the claim made by Lackaye and Margallit (2006), citing Barber and Olsen (2004), that "many students have detailed a decline in the quality of the school environment after moving to middle school. They have described their experience of reduced adults' support, lower grades in different subjects, decreased self-esteem, and feelings of loneliness" (p. 433). As you will read in the Findings and Analysis section, this was not the reality I found among the students I worked with. Before describing my participants and how I came to work with them, I will take a moment to look at the literature on arts-based pedagogy to establish a common understanding of what other theorists and practitioners have said about arts education generally and about similar arts-based contexts specifically.

School context: A discussion of arts-based pedagogy

Arts-based pedagogy takes many forms and has been used in a variety of teaching contexts. There are a number of educators who have researched arts education and arts-based instruction; their work substantiates the quickly expanding field of arts-based pedagogy. The literature on arts-based pedagogy is too vast to cover here. Therefore, this exploration will focus on two areas: the relationship between arts-based pedagogy and student engagement in learning and the development of nurturing environments.

Our education system, the goals and outcomes embedded in it, are anchored in the future. Our curriculum is based on skills and knowledge that we believe students will need as adults (Pitman, 1998). Although important, much of what we teach lacks relevance, purposefulness and urgency in the eyes of students. The arts, according to Pitman (1998), can serve as a bridge, connecting students' lived experiences with the abstracted curriculum, making the present relevant and providing a space where students can have some control. In a system where curriculum is dictated to students and little choice is given regarding what should be learned, the arts can mitigate the lack of student choice. Pitman (1998) explains, "engaging in an artistic activity [… teaches] us that the only point of experience over which we can have any control is the present" (p. 6). The arts, then, have the ability to genuinely engage students in the present, in who they are and where they are in their learning and understanding, making learning active rather than passive. In addition to making the present relevant, arts-based pedagogy "provides a vehicle for complex, multidimensional, and personal

learning" (Burnaford, Aprill & Weiss, 2001, p. 35) connecting "learning […] to our immediate need to know and respond" (Pitman, 1998, p. 7); thus arts-based pedagogy can assist in bridging the gap between students' immediate, lived experiences and the curriculum, which is often abstract and lacking in immediate relevance.

In addition to making what is being taught and learned more concrete and relevant for students, artistic creation also honours individuals by establishing a space where their unique perspectives are valued. When one creates art, one realizes that one "[can] write something that nobody ha[s] written before and that someone else would want to read and enjoy" (Pitman, 1998, p. 6). Similarly, Fowler (1996) found that using an arts-based approach confronts and disrupts the status quo and allows us to celebrate individual uniqueness. He explains, "the arts invite us to express our own visions and values and to explore the world from our own viewpoint and perception […] we come to respect diversity because we learn to respect our own differences and singularity" (p. 58). Because using an arts-based pedagogy encourages individuality it also engenders self-respect and "legitimize[s] self-identity" (p. 58). When a person engages in the artistic process they access and cultivate skills, talents and capacities that often otherwise lie latent and unacknowledged. This individual discovery leads to a sense of self-efficacy and lets students experience how to elicit (and receive) healthy praise, attention, acknowledgement and respect. Fowler (1996) also found that "the arts teach [students] to appreciate the commonalities that undergird our collective life: our right to express and communicate, our belief in our individuality and our

freedom to assert it, our respect for our differences, and our right to dissent" (p. 59). By creating a space where individuality is welcomed, the arts can also facilitate understanding for students (like those participating in this research), and "transform how learners are perceived by others. [Arts-based pedagogy] consistently reveals unrecognized abilities in learners formerly perceived as a problem by teachers and other students. The arts provide […] an educational space where young people can change how others perceive them" (Burnaford et. al, 2001, p. 19). Understanding and empathy are also encouraged because the arts expose students to the wider world; through the arts students' experience of multiple perspectives and approaches, their perceptions are challenged and they begin to see that their reality is one of many. In addition to connecting students with each other through appreciation of alternative and various perspectives, the arts have the potential to acquaint students with themselves. This can occur because the arts "propel and stimulate, fascinate and captivate, because they engage students personally with their true inner selves, not some conception of self imposed from outside" (Fowler, 1996 pg. 57). For students who experience feelings of low self-efficacy and do not perceive themselves as particularly adept or as having a sense of agency, the arts are particularly important. This is because

> art production makes learners aware of themselves as capable learners and productive citizens. The arts give learners a sense of agency […] For students with damaged perceptions of their own abilities, arts experiences can be life saving. Because the arts provide another lens for learning, unexplored abilities pop into focus. (Burnaford et. al, 2001, p. 20)

Agency can also be realized because art "springs from the mysteries of the learner's spirit, [thus spurring] students [to realize that they] have a stake in the outcomes of their art making" (Burnaford et. al, 2001, p. 21), thus fostering a sense of ownership of material and learning (Burnaford et. al, 2001). The arts also foster resilience because they "teach perseverance, tenacity, and the ability to withstand frustration" (p. 19). Finally, the arts can engender confidence in students and thus assist them as they "confront both the challenges that face society and the personal disappointments and frustrations that are a part of every mature life." (Pitman, 1998, p. 84)

Arts-based pedagogy also contributes to the creation of nurturing environments where a sense of community and excellence can be fostered. "[T]he arts facilitate joyful learning as no other process can, simply because they build on the innate individual and collective desire to express profound ideas and feelings" (Pitman, 1998, p. 7). When individuals experience joy, acceptance and purposefulness, their feelings of belonging within a community are bound to be more palpable and deeply rooted. The arts build communities of excellence in schools (Pitman, 1998). Larson (1997) found that the arts can lead to "increased student motivation to learn, better attendance among students and teachers, increased graduation rates, broader multicultural understanding, […] greater student engagement, growth in use of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills and increased creative capacities" (as cited in Cornett, 2003 pg. 4). The role that the arts play in fostering community will be elaborated upon later with the work of Maxine Greene.

The literature on arts-based pedagogy would benefit from more research in two areas. There currently exists a vast body of work dedicated to arts-based pedagogy, and there are numerous arts-based schools around North America. Some arts-based institutions, I suspect, are very similar, and others may be quite different. We must, for one, turn our efforts away from further substantiating the canon of literature that already exists on arts-based pedagogy and investigate the intricacies of the various models of arts-based pedagogy in use today, discovering as we do so how they differ from one another and what the strength(s) of each model are. This will enable researchers such as myself to be more specific and precise when we discuss particular forms or models of arts-based pedagogy; we will be able to move from generalizations towards context-specific findings. Second, there was an absence in the literature where the topic of learning differences and arts-based pedagogy is concerned. As a result, I have had to take research related to other populations or contexts and apply it to the population I was working with. This thesis represents a small step in addressing this gap, but much more is needed if we are to understand the role that the arts can play in the schooling experience of students who do not measure up to universal standards.

To summarize, the literature on arts-based pedagogy demonstrates that the arts can connect curriculum and learning to students, increasing the relevance of curriculum and engaging students more actively in their learning. Furthermore, arts-based pedagogy honours the individual. It creates a space in which multiple viewpoints are welcomed and fosters an appreciation for others and the opinions and experiences they share, and it can foster in students efficacy, agency,

competence and confidence. Not surprisingly, these outcomes will surface again in the Data Analysis and Findings section of this thesis.

Conducting research: Logistics

In consultation with the school principal, it was decided that I would work with students in grade 7 and 8. Using the principal as the intermediary, I accumulated a list of all the students who had been, in their previous schools, either labeled with learning disabilities and/or behaviour issues or prescribed modified programs because their reading and/or writing was not progressing at the expected rate. Of the six students I worked with, one had also been labeled with a mild-to-moderate cognitive disability and another had been diagnosed informally with mild dyslexia. Through this process of selecting participants I discovered that there is a great deal of inconsistency in how students are diagnosed and labeled, how and what information is communicated to parents and how findings and interventions are documented. I was told by the principal that each student's file (depending on the school and jurisdiction they had come from) indicated suggestions for testing, testing results, diagnoses or modified programs that had been implemented differently; there was no common procedure, it appeared, for communicating decisions or actions taken.

You will no doubt notice that I have made only general remarks profiling each student. This was a conscientious decision; for the purpose of this research, I do not think the specifics of each student's challenges are relevant. It is important to note that these students were, in their previous schools, marginalized or flagged

for their learning difference(s). Pedagogically I believe in focusing on assets as opposed to deficits, so I prefer to describe the research participants as follows: I found myself in the midst of a dancer, a storyteller, numerous comedians and musicians, a proud young Blackfoot man, an outdoorsman, multiple environmentalists, innovators and problem-solvers, social and political activists, individuals of deep faith, deep thinkers and pure souls who loved their families and friends. Our sessions (particularly the arts-based focus groups) were often light-hearted and usually included a healthy dose of friendly banter, joking and laughing.

Learning disabilities: A discussion

In order to contextualize my work within existing research I surveyed some of the literature that relates to students labeled with learning disabilities. I was most curious about finding out how this population of students was discussed, what others had discovered about how students (labeled) with learning disabilities perceive themselves and their abilities, and what we know about the consequences of, or motivations for labeling students. I was less concerned with delving into the existing literature on the cognitive capabilities and academic success of these students – an area that has been extensively studied (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006).

As soon as I embarked on this research I noticed that most of the literature (but certainly not all) defined participants according to their labels, and most often the labeling came from an orientation that was focused on students' deficits rather than their assets. There was also a lack of consistency in what was meant or

implied by the "learning disabilities" label; each author defined learning disabilities differently depending on the specific community or jurisdiction they were working within. For instance, Kelly and Norwich (2004) used the term "mild learning disabilities" in reference to students who had a "hearing impairment, specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) and moderate learning difficulties" (p. 412). Lackaye and Margalit (2006), on the other hand, stated that their scope included students who were diagnosed with a learning disability "using the Israeli Ministry of Education criteria [which was] consistent with the Israeli Law of Special Education and with Ministry of Education regulations" (p. 434). These researchers did not elaborate on terms such as 'difficulties,' nor did they explain in any detail the criteria established by their jurisdiction. The consequence of this absence of common language and criteria, this vagueness, means that individuals (like myself) who do not have an intimate understanding of the jargon or standards used within this discourse community have to make assumptions for ourselves, deducing what we can from the information provided to us. Knowing the specific criteria is not pertinent for this research because my focus is on students' experiences and perceptions and does not pertain to one kind of learning difference. That said, this ambiguity made it difficult to know whether or not authors were speaking about similarly characterized students and further solidified my belief that learning disabilities are constructs. It also became clear that a deficit model is predominant in the literature. When authors were justifying their research they often cited "low academic achievement" (Bear, Kortering & Brazil, 2006, p. 293), poor grades, low effort and low self-efficacy and less positive

emotional states (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). This orientation perpetuates the notion that students (labeled with) learning disabilities have something wrong with them, and they are in need of our help, rather than suggesting that the school system creates environments that do not foster success among differently abled students. Most of the literature does not differentiate between students or elaborate on the strengths or challenges particular students may face; instead, students are talked about as one homogenous group and, most often, their deficits are the focus of discussion (as in, the 'students with learning disabilities'). As Mara Sapon-Shevin astutely pointed out in an interview, "Many professionals have difficulty talking about intraindividual differences that exist among students. We have a paucity of words and phrases for discussing learning differences unless we talk about these concepts in terms of discrepancies or deficiencies" (Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 1999, p. 2). There is a clear gap in the literature here. It proved almost impossible to find research that addressed the issue of learning disabilities while maintaining a focus on students' assets rather than their deficits. It was equally challenging to find research on this topic that was not influenced by (what appears to be) a benevolent desire to *help* students improve their academic grades, motivation and effort so that they could experience success in their schooling. Here, my position is fundamentally at odds with most of the existing research related to students labeled with learning and behaviour differences. My motivation does not come from a desire to help students who struggle in school (either by learning why they struggle or offering suggestions to assist them to thrive despite their challenges). Through this research, I seek to understand how

an arts-based learning environment impacts students' senses of self as learners. My motivation comes from a desire to foster learning environments where all students feel a sense of significance, belonging, and connectedness to the world around them as well as the ability to competently assert themselves (in the ways they choose) upon the world; coincidently, these are the central tenets of what I believe the purpose of schooling should be. I want to understand what stories we are telling students about themselves and how those stories are influencing their perceptions of themselves as learners and individuals.

In my survey of the literature related to the socio-emotional wellbeing of students labeled with learning disabilities, self-perception emerged as a prominent theme. In their research Lackaye and Margalit (2006) found that there was a direct link between self-perception and perceived effort. They noticed that students "who had positive academic self-perceptions viewed themselves as good students and as hard working, whereas those with negative academic self-perceptions viewed themselves as poor students who did not work hard" (p. 433). They also found that students who felt academically challenged over a long period of time "view[ed] themselves as investing less effort and [were] less involved in studying" (pp. 441-442); likewise, they noted that the more competent a student felt, the more likely they were to feel a positive sense of self-efficacy (pp. 433-434). From these findings we can conclude the following. Students who do not view themselves as academically successful (most likely a result of getting low grades on tests and assignments) are more likely to view themselves as poor students and attribute their 'poorness' to what they perceive is a lack of effort on

their part, rather than the fact that they are most likely being asked to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that do not cater to their personal strengths. Eventually, if left unaddressed, these feelings can cause disengagement and a lack of motivation. What the research did not question was how the institution of schooling – which conventionally touts academic achievement and the meeting and/or exceeding of government-set benchmarks as the totem of success – could be changed so that students who were differently abled could experience and maintain feelings of success while moving forward in their learning.

Continuing with the theme of self-perception, Lackaye and Margalit (2006) assert that a healthy sense of self-efficacy is something that develops over time, and perceptions of one's own abilities emerge out of one's prior experiences – both achievements and challenges (p. 434). Research shows that it is not the existence of the diagnosis or label of 'learning disability' that determines a student's sense of efficacy, but access to "available sources for developing positive self-efficacy beliefs" (Hamptona & Mason, 2003 in Lackaye & Margalit, 2006, p. 434). In their study of students' perceptions in both special schools (those that cater to students labeled with learning disabilities) and mainstream schools (those that cater to the general population) in the United Kingdom, Kelly and Norwich (2004) discovered that "Most pupils were aware of their learning difficulties" (p. 425), although some students were hesitant to admit or recognize that they had difficulties (p. 426). This would indicate that social stigma may have played a role in students' willingness to make public the areas in which they were challenged; it was noted by Kelly and Norwich (2004) that many students

"reported feeling upset, frustrated or angry about their difficulties in learning" (p. 426). When the findings on student perceptions were examined more closely, it was found that students' perceptions of their educational abilities were "mostly positive" in special schools where the population was fairly homogenous but mixed in the mainstream schools where they were placed in classrooms where they were in the minority and made to feel like the minority (p. 426). These findings "show that the pupils in both mainstream and special schools are sensitive to the negative connotations associated with some of the labels applied to them" (p. 429) and substantiates my argument that schools are inherently social spaces where both knowledge and identities are constructed and negotiated.

The labeling of students with learning differences was my final area of research focus. Unlike students' perceptions, the topic of labeling has been well researched. The focus this area has garnered by others can be attributed to the fact that labeling has been a topic of concern for those within "special education and disability circles" (Kelly & Norwich, 2004, p. 413). Labels have been criticized for framing and highlighting peoples' differences as negative, the (albeit unintentional) result being the perpetuation of the notion that ability and disability are dichotomous and can be judged by others. Consequently this gives fodder to prejudicial and stigmatizing practices and can create a hierarchical view of peoples' worth and tainted expectations for those we have deemed disabled (p. 413). Unfortunately, in our society, imposing a label upon someone opens the proverbial gates and theoretically allows them to access support that they may otherwise not have access to (Norwich, 2004; Boyle & Lauchlan, 2007). Some

would justify a label, call it useful, argue that it facilitates needed intervention and support and, in doing so, outweighs the harm that may be caused by such a label (Archer & Green, 1996 in Boyle & Lauchlan, 2007, pg. 36). Ogilvy (1994 in Boyle & Lauchlan, 2007), on the other hand, suggests that although labels can make resources and support available they do not help us understand the specific needs (not to mention strengths) of individuals. Furthermore, labeling can lead to "stigmatization; bullying; reduced opportunities in life; a focus on within-child deficits to the exclusion of other, often more significant, factors; misclassification; and lowered expectations about what a 'labeled' child can achieve, indicating that the risks for potential harm may outweigh the perceived benefits" (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Advocating for an ethical practice, Boyle & Lauchlan (2007) argue that labels should only be used if they are going to open doors and foster opportunities for those who have been labeled (p. 37). There are others, like Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011), who advocate in favour of labeling students, saying that what we need are more specific ways of describing and articulating difference because the term disability is too general in its connotations, referring "to a huge range of more specific conditions" (p. 375). They further state that by not labeling students we are taking "[a] vow of silence regarding disabilities" (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, p. 374). Highly critical of social constructivists, Anastasiou & Kauffman (2011) state that the complex notion of disability cannot be reduced to a merely sociological phenomenon (p. 376).

From literature on learning disabilities, which has been synthesized above, the following points are salient and most applicable to this research. There is no

universal standard that dictates what constitutes a learning disability or difficulty. This substantiates the notion that learning disabilities are constructs defined differently in different social and academic spaces. Even though there are no common or universal criteria, students who have been labeled with learning disabilities are thrown together into one homogenous grouping, indistinguishable from each other, their individuality and uniqueness forgotten or ignored. When students experience repeated academic difficulties they may become disengaged and perceive that they exert less effort than their peers, similarly, students who perceive themselves as academically successful view themselves as good students. Finally, labeling is a complex issue. On one hand, many students will not get the support they need unless they have been diagnosed and labeled. On the other hand, labeling can create lowered expectations, justify discriminatory practices and lead to feelings of marginalization. I would be remiss if I did not point out that nowhere in the literature I surveyed did I come across the idea that what we consider to be learning disabilities may in fact be the result of inadequate teaching practices and institutional structures rather than deficits residing in the heads of students. What happens to students' perceptions of themselves when they attend a school that focuses on assets and, in its pedagogical methods, refutes the notion of disability instead of approaching each student as an individual with unique strengths and challenges, deserving of independence and support? This research occurred in just such a setting.

Gathering stories: Methods

Before explaining the specific methods used, I wish to share an anecdote. It is one I will return to later on, but it is fitting to share at this juncture because it speaks to who these students are. During one focus group, when the students were creating art pieces, they decided to play the "animal alphabet game." The rules, which they explained to me, were: one person starts by naming an animal whose name starts with the letter A. The next person names an animal that starts with the letter B, and the game continues thus, the goal being to reach Z. If a person can't think of an animal, speaks out of turn or says an animal starting with the wrong letter then they are eliminated from the game. We began to play, going around the circle one by one. At one point a student spoke the name of an animal whose name started with a C when we had reached K. The student had misspelled the word! The other students looked around at each other, there was a pause, and then a second student jumped in with "kangaroo." After another pause, the game continued. No one demanded that the student who had spoken in error be eliminated, and from that point onward, whenever someone was struggling to think of an animal or mistook the spelling of an animal, the group would chime in with a suggestion. The students had collectively and tacitly turned a game of exclusion and elimination into a cooperative and inclusive, low-risk game that strengthened the cohesion of the group.

While collecting information I endeavored to treat the participants not as subjects but as creative individuals who were the authority on their own experiences (Ravet, 2007 in Burton, Hadkinson, O'Connor, & Torstensson, 2011).

To gather rich information I used a multi-method approach consisting of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and an arts-based focus group (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Burton, et al., 2011). I would also consider my own art-making as a source of information. Each method reinforced the theoretical orientation underpinning this thesis and sought to provide participants with multiple settings and ways to convey and articulate their knowledge. When choosing my methods I was cognizant of providing opportunities for the participants to have their voices heard by me.

By employing interviews, I sought to understand how students perceived their own situations. I was acutely aware that this method, as Fontana & Frey (2005) note, is "not merely the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers" (p. 696) but an active exchange between interviewer (myself) and interviewee in which we were collaborating to creating a "negotiated, contextually based" (p. 698) text. In these exchanges neutrality could not be assumed because, like my participants, I too was embedded in my own contextual location and influenced by my biases (Scheurich, 1995 in Fontana & Frey, 2005). Furthermore, the interviews were taking place at a school – a location that has its own contextual implications (neither good or bad) to be considered (Fontana & Frey, 2005). As a former teacher of the school and of most of the participants, I also had to be mindful that students could have perceived me as being in a position of power.

Instead of a traditional discussion-based focus group, I choose to use an arts-based focus group. Burton et al. (2011) explain that young people feel less

shy and prefer focus groups to one-on-one interviews. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) found that focus groups "often produce data that are seldom produced through individual interviewing and observation and that result in especially powerful interpretive insights" (p. 903). I found that this was also true for arts-based focus groups. Focus groups also allow the researcher to observe interactions between participants and "capitalize on the richness and complexity of group dynamics" (p. 903). I choose to incorporate artistic activities in the focus group sessions because I wanted to make "use of a larger spectrum of creative intelligence and communications, [which, some argue,] generate important information that often feels more accurate, original, and intelligent than more conventional descriptions" (McNiff, 2008, p. 30). The focus of each arts-based focus group was as follows: 1) The students were asked to draw on each face of a wooden block and represent one of the following per face: the Calgary Arts Academy, the past, the present, the future, who they were, and belonging; 2) The students were asked to bring in an object that represented them as students and share their thoughts with the group; 3) Using string and beads to indicate significant events in their schooling experience students created textile timelines; 4) Each student composed a personal slogan with the intent to either inspire other students in similar positions or express their attitudes towards learning; 5) Finally, drawing inspiration from a technique taught to me by Spencer Harrison, students brought in a photograph of themselves that was taken while they were attending their previous schools. That photograph was photocopied onto the center of a piece of paper. Around the image the students wrote about how they felt as

learners at their old schools. We then covered that initial page with tracing paper and made a second layer upon which students wrote how they felt as learners at the Calgary Arts Academy.

Of course, as someone fairly new to research and these methods in particular, there were unanticipated limitations that became obvious after the process was underway; these limitations affected the amount and kind of information I collected. Insights into these constraints are elaborated upon in the Researcher Reflection section at the end of this thesis. With the assurance that a reflection on the methods will be taken up shortly, let us move on to an exploration of the information collected.

A memory about receiving remediation …

It must have been in grade seven or eight that I started remediation. I would dismiss myself from class at regular, prescheduled intervals (I think it was once a week) and head off to my one-on-one sessions in the portable next door. I can't remember what I did there. I did not mind going. I do not remember feeling like I had to hide where I was or what I was doing from my classmates; there was nothing to be ashamed of. I remember wondering if it was helping (I couldn't really tell). Sometimes I welcomed the opportunity to leave class for a bit.

A memory about the power of embodied learning ...

It was grade one. I walked onto the stage with the rest of my class and took my position at center stage. Crouched into a ball, hugging my knees, head tucked down, I waited. When it was my time I uncurled myself and started, ever so slowly, to straighten and stand up; head first, arms reaching out and then up, legs straightening, finally on my tippy toes... I looked up at the sky and reached my arms as high above my head as they would go. In those few moments on stage in my yellow shirt and green skirt I was a bulb buried deep in the ground that grew with the help of water and sun into a daffodil.

A memory about the engagement that can be fostered and the long-lasting impact of freehand drawing…

When I think of the schoolwork I did in grade eight, a series of pieces stand out vividly in my mind's eye – specifically, two drawings. I can see them clearly still today: a drawing of a femur and a second drawing of the knee joint, both in charcoal. I remember drawing, with great concentration, paying attention to every detail and unaware of anything else going on around me, the bone and joint into my book, using dark lines and smudging to make both come to life. I remember not only the contours of the bone, and the grooves in the joint, but the act of drawing, the motion. I have no recollection of the image I copied from.

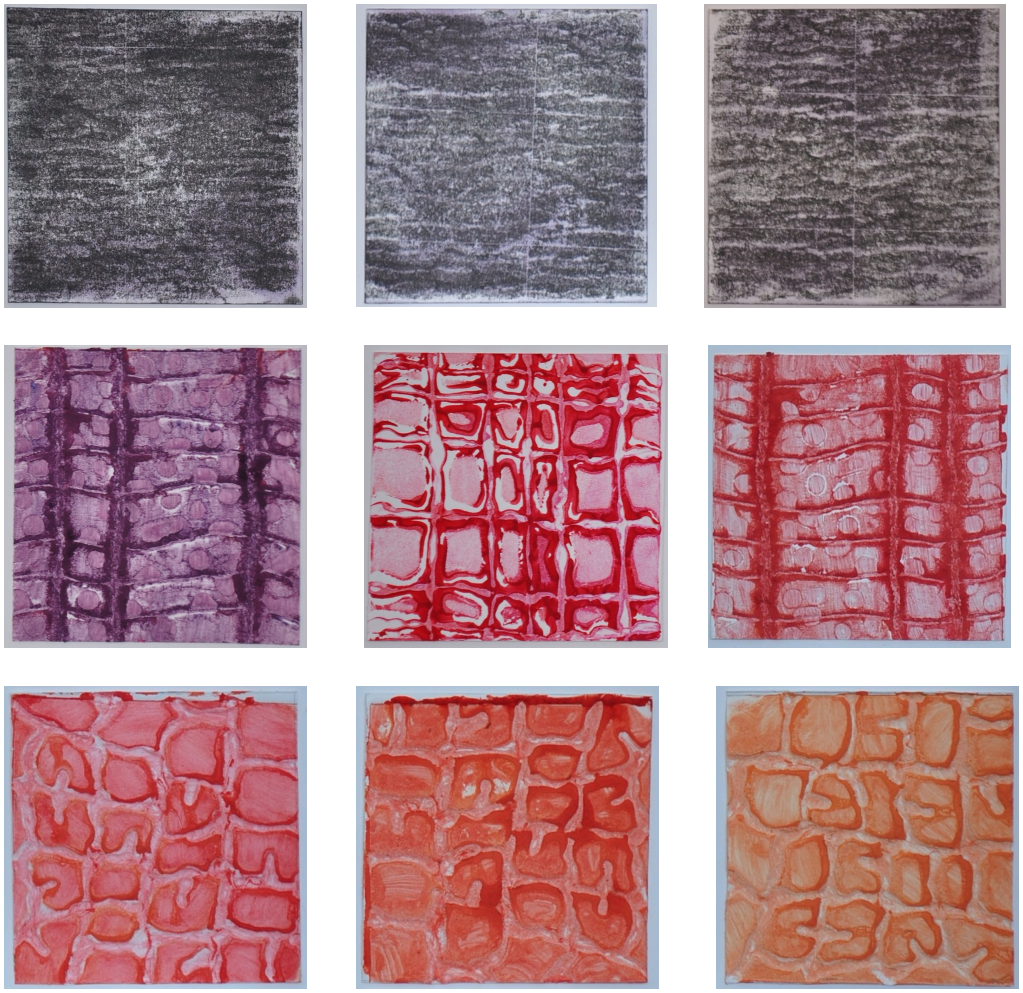


Figure 3: Acetone transfers – Tree bark & Collgraphy – Maple tree cellular cross sections

FALL

Listening to the Students: Findings and analysis

The process of analyzing the information that had been gathered was multi-directional, and although it was undertaken systematically, it was also a dynamic, emergent and organic process. Directly after collecting and transcribing the information collected from the students I audited a studio-based visual arts course. I used this two-week experience – being immersed in a community of creativity and visual-art-making – to explore themes that had emerged from the information I had gathered while transcribing the sessions in which the students had participated. This process of thinking deeply about, discussing and visually exploring themes and imagery that had emerged out of the students' stories led me to a deeper and more complex understanding of the information I was working with; my own creative exploration led me from understanding manifest themes to seeing the latent themes that lay underneath the surface (Saldana, 2009). In addition to this process of creatively unearthing latent themes, I took a systematic approach to determining and then narrowing down the recurring themes into three broad, overarching themes and three additional secondary themes (these themes will be listed shortly). Within the context of this thesis, when I use the term *theme*, I'm drawing on DeSantis and Ugarriza's (2000) definition; they explain that a theme is "an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole" (p. 362).

In my systematic analysis I first read through the transcripts and drew out themes that directly related to the aim of my research. For instance, when I asked Chuck whether or not he felt a sense of belonging at his school (after asking him to tell me what belonging meant to him), and he replied in the affirmative and elaborated by saying "I have lots of friends here" (May, 9, 2012), friendship emerged as one of the themes. After reading through all the transcripts and noting down all the themes that were present I had a list of twenty-seven. From that list I began to look for themes that either came up frequently or that I could cluster together and group via a few key words or a single sentence. From the initial list of twenty-seven themes I was able to create four clusters containing themes that were similar in nature and a fifth cluster of stand-alone theme (themes that did not group easily with others). From there I was able to cluster the five groupings further ending up with three overarching themes. The three overarching themes that emerged through this process are 1) students feel confidence, hope and aspiration; 2) students' current arts-based school is a supportive community; 3) students feel recognition and appreciation of strengths and efforts. Throughout this process there were four specific themes that came up repeatedly, these became the secondary themes. They are 1) friendship; 2) individual effort; and 3) perception of caring adults.

Below I provide a summary of the comments that the participants made that speak to each overarching theme. I then discuss the secondary themes before moving on to the responses of one participant whose experiences can be best honoured by addressing them separately from the rest of the information gathered.

First however, you will find photograph of the artwork that the students created during our time together, these images (or visual texts) can be read independently or in conjunction with the students' comments.

Macca

Little R

Chuck

Lucky

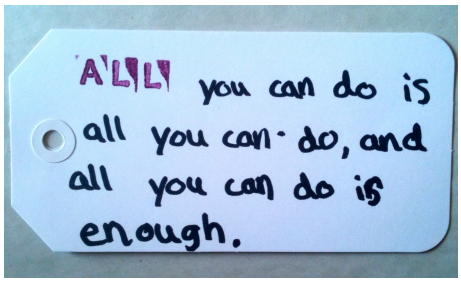
MC

Gregory

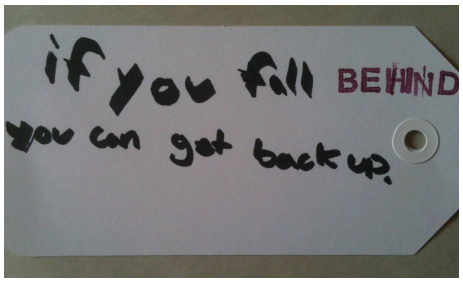
Figure 4: Student artwork – Wooden blocks

Chuck Gregory Lucky Macca Little R MC

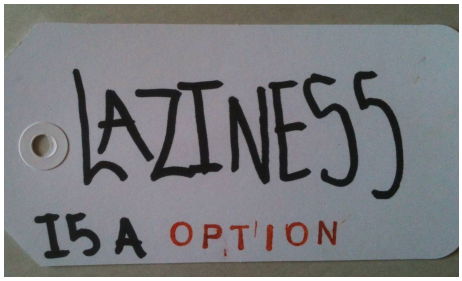
Figure 5: Student artwork – Textile timelines



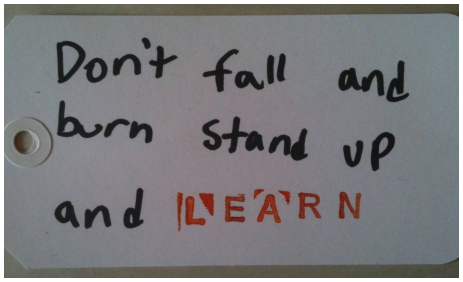
Gregory



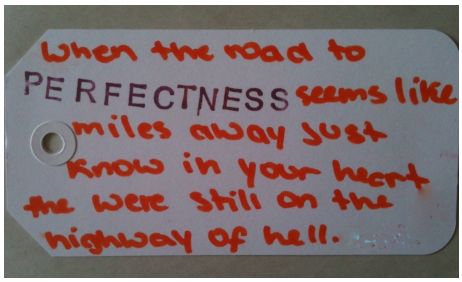
Chuck



Lucky

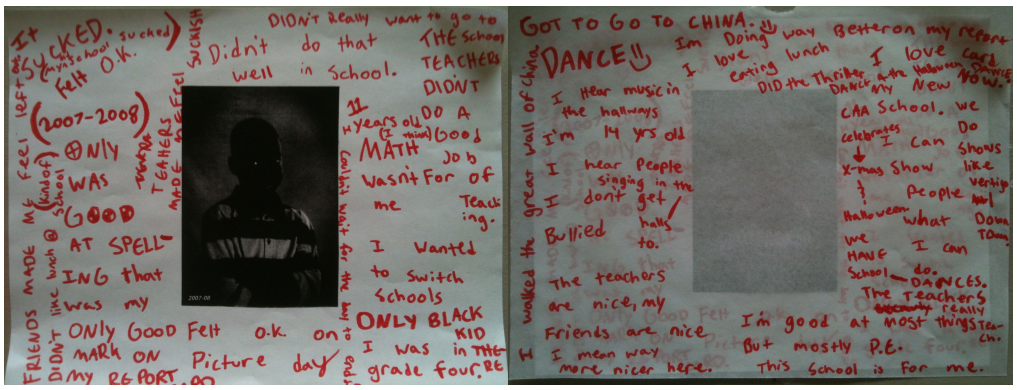


Little R

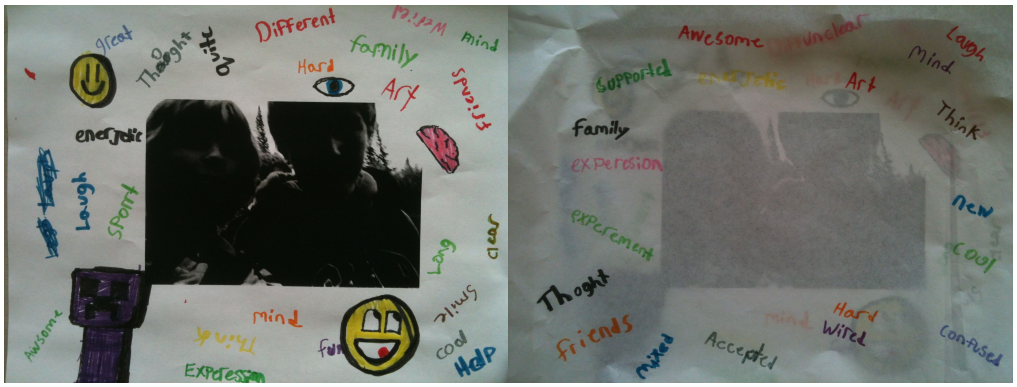


Macca

Figure 6: Student artwork – Personal slogans

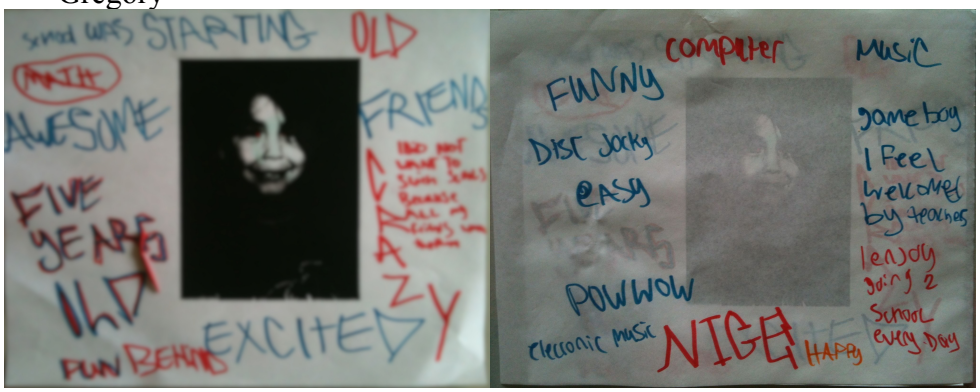


Little R



MC

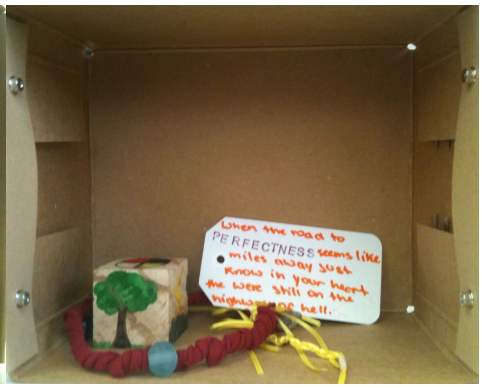
Gregory



Lucky

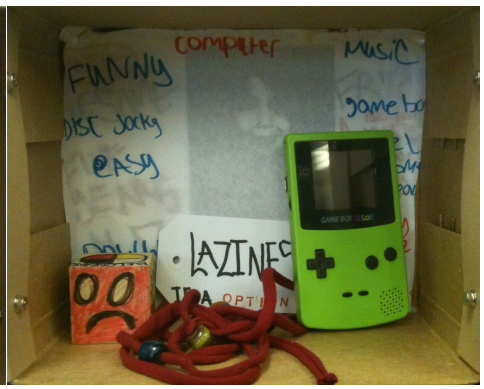
Figure 7: Student artwork – Portraits

MC



Macca

Little R



Lucky

Gregory

Figure 8: Student artwork: Shadow boxes

Overarching Themes

Students feel confidence, hope and aspiration

Chuck:

When asked if he felt confident in his abilities as a student, Chuck replied, "Yep!" Similarly, when asked about how he feels when a new concept is being taught, he indicated that he felt confident and able to "tackle it." When what he'd like to do after high school, Chuck first replied "I don't know, I haven't made up my mind yet," but when asked what ideas he was considering, he said he was considering engineering and he was especially interested in automotive engineering.

Gregory:

When asked if he had confidence in his abilities, Gregory replied "Yeah, now I do; well, before, if I didn't get it, I totally thought 'I suck, I can't do this at all,' [but] now if I can't get it I still try hard and I ask for help." When asked about his plans for after high school Gregory indicated that he wanted to play in a band. When asked if his plans might ever change, should he decide he wanted to do something else, something that required university, college or other training, would he be open to going that route, he replied "Yeah." When asked to describe himself, Gregory said "I try hard. I always used to give up really easy, [but] now that I know how to keep trying and not give up I'll always try on stuff even if I don't get it, and I'll usually ask for help if I don't get it. If there isn't help that I can get then I'll keep trying and, yeah, I'm confident in myself." On the face of the wooden block that was meant to represent the present, Gregory drew a present

(gift) and explained, "it's a present (gift) for the present time. I drew a present because life is full of surprises and it's really exciting." When Gregory was describing the words he had brainstormed to represent how he felt at the Calgary Arts Academy he elaborated upon two of the words for the group, saying, "one of them is 'successful' and that one is really, like, almost encouraging to me because before [at my old school] I didn't feel successful and I didn't feel like I could do anything and I failed at everything I tried to do but now that my confidence is growing and I feel really like I can do anything I'm successful! And, [the other word is] 'bright.' I think I'm bright, it's kind of like I feel like I'm bright and I really can shine, and I can do a lot."

Little R:

When asked what the difference was between his old school and his current school, in terms of why he felt belonging at the present school (the Calgary Arts Academy), Little R said "now here, I can just, like, this is, like, more for me; I can like do stuff through the arts and stuff instead and get good grades and marks, that sort of thing." Little R expressed a desire to be a Broadway actor and spoke with excitement and enthusiasm when he explained his dreams of stardom to me. At one point in the interview we talked about opportunities for leadership Little R told me that he tries to teach his peers things "here and there." When I inquired about how that made him feel, he replied "it makes me feel good because I feel like [I] can teach somebody else, and they can go teach somebody else and it just carries on." On the face of his wooden block that represented his present, Little R drew a boy standing on grass and described it this way: "for my

present I did, like, me standing on grass because I'm, like, growing and learning stuff more and more each day and I'm really proud of that." On the block face that represented his future, Little R explained, "I drew a brain because I think I'm going to learn a lot of stuff when I'm older and have a lot of good ideas."

Lucky:

Lucky responded "yep" when I inquired whether he had confidence in his own abilities. He also indicated that he would be more successful at school if he wasn't "lazy." Lucky feels he could achieve mastery if he choose to behave and not socialize during class, and do his homework. When asked about his aspirations and plans for after high school, Lucky expressed a desire to be a DJ and go to university for "politics and world cultures."

ML:

When asked if he had confidence in his abilities as a student, ML replied, "I have confidence, yeah, in my learning." When asked about what his plans were for after high school ML said he was going to work and travel for a while. I asked what his plans were beyond that and he said "I want to go to college or university after that."

Students' current arts-based school is a supportive community

Chuck:

When I asked Chuck if he felt like a successful student, he replied "yeah, because the teachers and the students listen to each other's ideas." When I inquired further into what else (if anything) the teacher did to make Chuck feel

supported he said “well, they’re not mean, because if I don’t get something, they always come to help instead of just saying ‘well, read the instructions.’ Instead of saying how they taught it, they explain it in a different way, […] giving me different ways to help me figure out how to do something.” Chuck indicated that because the teachers were willing to help him and explain things in different ways he felt more confident as a student; he said “they just show [support] through their attitude […]. they make me feel like I can do it.” Chuck also mentioned that he felt supported by his peers “because they’re saying, like, ‘don’t worry, you’ll get through this,’ [and] ‘we can help you if you’re getting in trouble’.” When asked if he was comfortable asking the teachers questions he replied “Yep, and asking my good friends.”

Gregory:

When asked if he felt like a successful student, Gregory responded “Yeah, mainly. If I ever have trouble with something I’ll usually ask a friend [because] they usually get it, [so] yeah, I feel successful. I don’t feel like I’m failing.” When Gregory talked about a situation at the Calgary Arts Academy that would have caused him to “really get stressed out” and “freak out,” an event that otherwise would have been “really stressful,” he simply said “I was nervous.” When asked if he felt supported at school Gregory remarked, “yep,” because of his “lots of friends; they’re always supporting me … in whatever I do.” He commented about the teachers as well: “they’re just encouraging of us, um, yeah. Especially if there’s like something I’m embarrassed about. They’re like, ‘don’t worry about it, you’ll be fine’.” On the face of his wooden block that represented the Calgary

Arts Academy, Gregory drew a sun and said this about it: "for the Calgary Arts Academy I have a sun because it's helped me get back on track because I used to really struggle with school, and the Calgary Arts Academy has really given me a boost I guess and the sun's really bright and powerful." I asked Gregory what he liked about the Calgary Arts Academy and if he could describe it. His response was, "it's really encouraging and the kids are really nice, you can always ask for help. […] The environment in general is not rushed; it's really … a lot more things relate to me in this school than in the other school. […] It's really uplifting. It's just the environment's different."

Little R:

At one point in our conversation, Little R remarked, "but here I'm OK at school," This prompted me to ask if there was anything other than grades that told him he was "OK at school." He replied, "well the teachers are really nice […] they are nice to me and they just, like, [pause] I can't really explain other than that … it's just that they are nice to me and I respect them and they respect me." At another point in the discussion Little R told me that the teachers were proud of him. I asked him to explain what they did to show him that and he said that they "[tell] me I'm doing a really good job, they say [it], yeah, and then that just really encourages me to do more great successful work." When I asked Little R if he felt safe at school, he replied "Yeah I do; I feel more safe here than I did at my old school, and I feel more safe here, and I feel more confident."

Lucky:

When Lucky and I were talking about learning, I asked if learning new things caused him any stress or anxiety. He replied, "not any more, but I used to be like that." I asked what he thought made the Calgary Arts Academy different from his other school and Lucky remarked, "[t]he teachers are more welcoming, […] and people are more nice, like students are." I tried to encourage more elaboration by asking about what he liked about this school, how he felt he was treated and what he thought made this school special. Lucky said "I'm treated equal, equal to other students at this school," He went on to say, "[t]he teachers care about their students, and they don't … like, if you do bad, the teachers say 'you can do better.' They give you, like, strength, I guess." What do you mean by "strength," I asked. "They give you guidance and encourage you." When Lucky explained the 'belonging' face of his wooden block, he said, "I feel belonging when I see this because I belong at the Calgary Arts Academy because everyone is so welcoming here and they have so much support for my schooling and they don't criticize people for having … if they're, like, slow at learning and stuff like that." In one of our group discussions Lucky shared with the group his experience of being Blackfoot and going to powwows because, as he described, "my culture's kind of slowly dying out and I'm just trying to bring it back to life and carry on the traditions that my ancestors left for us." He then proceeded to tell us that "at my old school I [didn't really tell people because] they didn't really care that much about it." When asked why he decided to tell us, he replied, "I'm telling

you guys now because it's something – a part of my life that's really important to me."

ML:

I asked ML if he felt supported by the teachers and he replied, "yeah!" When I pried as to how the teachers show support, he said "[t]hey help, they support me, they say 'you did a good job,' 'you did a great job,' 'your next one will be good'." When asked how he could tell he was a successful student, his response was: "my marks, the way the teachers act when they talk to me, the respect I'm given from other students."

Students feel recognition and appreciation of their strengths and efforts

Chuck:

When we were discussing what it meant to be a successful student Chuck remarked that it made him feel successful when "[the teachers and students] accept and think about [Chuck's ideas and comments]." He also recounted an incident when, at a previous school, he got in trouble for drawing. He continued, "here you're allowed to draw in this school because it's an arts school, and they actually bring drawing into math and education and I like that because I don't get in trouble." When I asked Chuck to tell me about a project or assignment that was memorable, for which he felt able to use his strengths, he replied "no, I can't think of a project, I can't remember. Probably any project because school's so awesome." He continued, "I guess any project. I just really like the school, they have good ideas."

Gregory:

Gregory spoke about having his effort acknowledged. “Sometimes trying hard doesn’t always give you what you want, and you can try hard and it won’t work all the time, but in this school they also include effort rather than just achievement … [they] mark you on effort, so if you do try hard and it doesn’t work, you still get marks for it.” When speaking about often feeling rushed in his previous school, Gregory explained that, at the Calgary Arts Academy, “if you don’t have something done right away in this school you can ask for an extension and they’ll usually say yes. Back then [at this previous school] they’d just say ‘this is the day and if it’s not done then you’ll get nothing for your mark’.” When talking about working with his peers Gregory explained, “If we’re in a small group for work or something and I say something, like I suggest something, people will take it in and think about it.”

Little R:

Little R felt recognized and valued as an individual, and he felt that it was safe for him to show others that he was a dancer. He explained, “when I dance, people notice me and say ‘that’s good, that’s really good’ […] and that’s what I think makes me feel more successful because, like, at my old school I couldn’t really dance because I was too shy, [worried] I’d get teased or whatever, but, like, here I don’t feel that way.” When Little R was explaining that his report cards made him feel like the teachers were proud of him, he said, “[my report cards] make me like feel like a good student, like what’s good about me and what I need to work on a little bit more, but other than that it’s pretty much just good stuff.”

Little R also mentioned that it made him feel encouraged "when someone's like 'Little R, you're doing a good job,' or 'keep up the great work,' or when [the teacher] is explaining my work to the class as an example and saying that it's Mastery[4], then that encourages me to do more." When asked how he feels when he shares work in class, Little R replied, "respected," and when asked to describe, using one word, how the Calgary Arts Academy made Little R feel as a student, his reply was "creative."

ML:

When talking about what made ML feel successful, he replied "they give me the freeness [*sic.*] to do what I want. At [my] old school, they [gave] you information and they'd say 'get it done, figure it out,' at my old school they'd give instructions. [Here] they give me information, they give me my resources, but I have to figure it out […] I feel free and able to do with the project what I wish to do with it."

[4] Mastery refers to the highest level of academic achievement at the Calgary Arts Academy

Secondary Themes

Friendship

Chuck:

When elaborating on why Chuck felt a sense of belonging at the Calgary Arts Academy, he explained that he has a lot of friends and he feels belonging because his friends "include me in, like, with their little groups and everything, like they listen to my ideas, they don't just say 'you're, like, weird, you must have really bad ideas,' or 'I don't like your hair, go away'." When asked if he had felt belonging at one of his prior schools, Chuck replies "Yeah, because I had a lot of friends there"; and when asked about the school he most recently transferred from Chuck explained that he didn't feel any belonging "because I had no friends in my other school." When we were discussing whether or not Chuck felt supported, he said he did because his friends offered encouragement when he was having a hard time or was in trouble. He also mentioned that when he didn't understand something, he was comfortable asking both the teacher and "my good friends." When explaining his textile timeline, Chuck mentioned friends a number of times, saying, "this [bead] is when I was in kindergarten to grade 2 and I had a really good friend, we were friends, like, forever, […] And this [bead] was also when I went to a new school [and] I had no friends, I was scared […] I had no friends […] this last bead kind of it represents when I came here, I found some friends who liked me for who I am, they accepted me."

Gregory:

When Gregory was asked what makes him feel like he belongs at the Calgary Arts Academy, he replied, "the people" he elaborated by talking about being a new student and feeling belonging when "I started to get friends, and those friends showed me their friends and stuff and I know pretty much everyone in school." Likewise, he attributes feeling a sense of belonging at his old school to the good friends he had. When explaining his textile timeline he remarked, "in between gr. 2 and 3 it was kind of [pause], I didn't like it because I knew I was switching schools and all my friends were at my other school," he continued on later saying "and grade 5 I came to the Calgary Arts Academy and it's been better because... ya […] because it's easier and there's lots of friends here."

Little R:

During our conversation, when Little R spoke about feeling successful, he touched on the importance of friendships. When explaining the difference between his previous schools and the Calgary Arts Academy, Little R said, "but this [school] is much better because I have more friends here and I am able to eat lunch and talk and stuff with them and hang out, but at my old school I pretty much just [hung] out with no one." When Little R spoke about being supported and encouraged as a student, he remarked, "I like my friends [because] of the way they're, like, there for me whenever I need them." Little R explained one of the faces of his wooden block thus: "For my past, I... at my old school I didn't really feel like I belonged that much, and all the other kids were just, like, friends and stuff. I was just sort of left out, and I was just by myself." His drawing shows him,

with tears streaming down his face, in the center of a circle of happy smiling faces.

Lucky:

When Lucky was describing belonging to me he explained, “it means having friends and I don’t know, you just get accepted and stuff, without having problems,” when asked to elaborate on ‘and stuff’ he continued, “I don’t know, like if you need help with your math people will help you […] I have people that I talk to and can hang out with at lunch time and I have friends.” When asked if he felt like a successful student at his previous school Lucky replied “no” and continued by saying “not in the class but at recess I had friends.” Friendship also came up on Lucky’s textile timeline. He described, “this [bead] is grade 1 [and] it’s kinda dark because I didn’t know anyone or anything, and I was just, like, scared to try new things. This [bead] is grade 3 where I had some friends.” One of the things Lucky said he remembered most clearly about his old school was “[having] a lot of friends.”

ML:

ML mentioned friends frequently. When I asked him to describe belonging, he said, “um, belonging, well, sort of, just, everybody fits … I remember I had problems with that in grade two and three, well, grade one, two and three, because the first time I went to grade one I didn’t have very many friends.” ML then recounted in detail his first three years of grade school and the dynamics between himself and three other students who he very badly wanted to be friends with. Finally, in grade three, he became friends with all three boys and

consequently felt a sense of belonging. He explained, "yeah, belonging became a big part for me after grade three. Elementary school just got great, because I had no friends until grade three." When I asked ML about feeling successful as a student, he explained that his success was tied to his friends; "well, grade three, when I had no friends, I had really bad grades because I had no one to relieve my stress with or to be friends with, but after I got some good friends, my grades went up." When I inquired if ML felt supported at the Calgary Arts Academy, he replied, "oh yeah. I feel like my friends try to support me in what I do and what I try to do, my parents support me in my drawing and stuff like that, and yeah, I feel supported by my parents and my friends." I asked ML about leadership opportunities at the Calgary Arts Academy in order to find out whether ML felt he had opportunities to teach things to other students or take a leadership role in classroom and whole-school activities. ML interpreted my question about leadership in terms of being the leader of a group of friends. He explained, "in my student life, yes, but in my social life with my friends, I don't really find myself the leader. And in this school there isn't really a leader … [at] my old school there was. Like I said, at my old school you had to earn your way to the top. And that was hard, because I spent all my years at that school trying as hard as I could to be friends with these people and I earned my way to the top. So [it was] hard, you [had] to earn your way up there. And [at] this school I don't really find that sort of thing." Later on in our discussion I asked ML what he felt the role of friends was in creating a positive school experience, and his reply was, "I mean, school, the main thing for me is having friends. […] I know the only reason we come to

school is to learn, but the only reason I come to school is to see friends. […] That's the only reason I come to school, it's my only motivation. Like when the day's half-way through, and I feel like it's been three days, you know … your motivation is you still have friends there. […] I don't really care for school, I care for my friends. I like to have friends, I don't come to school to learn. I come to school to see my friends." When I asked ML if he could describe a project that stood out to him, he talked about a play that he was in at the start of the year, when he had just arrived at the Calgary Arts Academy. He explained, "I was very new at this school, [so] I didn't get a very big part, but it was fun because I met three of the friends I have now there." One of the events on ML's textile timeline was "when I got my first friend".

Individual effort

Four of the participants addressed issues of individual effort in the slogans they created – slogans meant either to be inspirational for other students in similar positions or expressive of their attitudes towards learning. The four slogans are:

"Don't fall and burn, stand up and learn." – Little R.

In his explanation, Little R said, "it means that, like, if you're trying to do your work, don't give up on it; just keep on learning and just try to learn more and get better at it for the next time."

"Laziness is an option." – Lucky

Lucky said this about his slogan: "you have the choice to do something […] you can be lazy about it and do nothing, but if you want to succeed in school then you do something [about it]."

"If you fall behind, you can get back up." – Chuck

Chuck explained his slogan this way: "it means if you fall behind you can get back up (laughter) […] it relates to me because I've had so many times when my work is overdue and I still haven't completed it, and I've asked for extensions […] but yeah [in the end] I get my work in."

"All you can do is all you can do, and all you can do is enough." – Gregory

Gregory described the meaning behind his slogan this way, "I'll always try my hardest for [school work] and I'll give it all I have, and it's always enough because it really is all you can do."

Perception of caring adults

Chuck:

When I asked Chuck if the teachers played a role in making him feel like he belonged, he replied by saying, "Oh yeah! The teachers really help a lot because they don't really … I don't know, I just really feel like the teachers mean to be there for you … I can't really explain it, the teachers just have sense of acceptance or something. I don't know what word I'm looking for." Later, when

Chuck was describing why he felt successful as a student at the Calgary Arts Academy, he explained, "because the teachers and the students listen to each other's ideas and they think 'that's a pretty good idea' – most of the students – only a tiny, tiny margin [of students] don't listen." When describing what made Chuck feel supported as a student at the school, he remarked, "well, [the teachers] just show [support] through their attitude, like, from how they seem, their personalities, makes me feel like I can do it."

Gregory:

When describing what was different about the Calgary Arts Academy, Gregory explained, "the teachers will explain stuff more and if you don't get it you can ask for help and they'll help you." When describing why he felt supported at the Calgary Arts Academy, Gregory had this to say: "I'll always get help and [the teachers] always help me, and I always just feel support because I'm getting that help."

Little R:

When I asked Little R if he felt successful as a student, he replied, "yeah, here and there, when I really try hard. Yeah, like when I really try hard and stuff like that I think it really pays off on my report card when I look at it and, like, [my] parents are proud of me, I'm proud of me and the teachers are pretty proud of me, and that helps me move forward and not put me back." When describing what makes Little R feel supported, he said, "my parents too. Like when they say 'good job' for dancing, that makes me feel really good," he continued: "well […] the teachers [too], because they make me feel good when I'm doing a good job."

Lucky:

When I asked Lucky if he felt his talents and interests were appreciated at the Calgary Arts Academy, he explained, "yeah, I do feel like I'm appreciated, like [names four teachers], they all appreciate me." When explaining why he thought the Calgary Arts Academy was unique, Lucky said, "[the] teachers care about their students, and they don't, like, if you do bad, the teachers say you can do better, they give you, like, strength." Lucky also spoke about how he felt the teachers were welcoming and would take the time to help him when he needed it.

ML:

When asked if he felt the teachers had confidence in him, ML replied, "yeah, I feel like most of the teachers do have confidence in me." When responding to an inquiry about whether he felt supported at school, ML remarked, "teachers, I feel mostly supported by," He went on to explain, "they help, they support me, they say 'you did a good job,' 'you did a great job,' 'your next one will be good'" and "yeah, I feel supported by my parents [too]." ML explained that he felt successful because of the grades he was getting and "the way the teachers act when they talk to me."

Honouring A Different Experience

One participant's responses stood apart from the rest. What this participant had to say was very different from what the other five students said. When I analyzed the information, the overarching and secondary themes emerged easily from the responses of the other five students, but Macca's responses were so different that it did not seem just to either her or the other five to lump them together. I chose to present Macca's responses on their own so that her voice and that of the other participants could be honored.

Macca:

When I asked Macca how she would describe what belonging means and/or looks like, she responded, "[it's when] everybody accepts everybody a little, but there is always going to be people [who] are going to easily to take you in, and if they don't it doesn't really matter because there's always going to be other people. So yeah. Belonging is [pause] yeah, we use it quite a bit [at the Calgary Arts Academy]." When I asked if Macca felt like she belonged at the Calgary Arts Academy she replied in the negative, and when I asked why she thought that was, she replied, "the way people treat people, it's just not a good … and as a student … some teachers don't really see it, because teachers don't see everything right." I asked Macca if she felt she had friends, and she responded, "Yeah, like, one. There are not really any because they left." I inquired whether she felt the teachers could help a student feel belonging, and Macca replied, "I think the only teacher here that tried to actually help people feel like they belong was [name of teacher who, four months earlier, had suddenly and unexpectedly

passed away]. That was the only teacher, I felt, that really I felt belonging to, and I could talk to and stuff. Yeah, that kind of sucks, I guess." In response to being asked whether she felt the teachers cared about her, Macca said, "depends which ones … yeah, some are naïve about me, and others are like 'oh hi' and they, like, always greet you," I asked whether there were teachers who she felt cared about her, and Macca replied, "Oh yeah, totally," She elaborated: "I think most of them just care about me as a student but, like, [name of deceased teacher] […] would totally see past the studentness of it and go right to the friendship and who you really are, and that's why … yeah, that's one of the reasons why I actually stayed in this school."

When I asked Macca about her experience at her previous school, she explained that she did not feel confident in non-arts-related subjects, and "I wasn't expressing myself as freely as I do now [at the Calgary Arts Academy], because everybody looks weird at this school in their own way [so now] I'm like, 'yay! I fit in'." I asked Macca what she feels when new concepts and topics are taught for the first time and she replied "I'm mostly OK with it. I really like trying new things, but it really depends on how you learn it that makes you anxious or not because if they just shove it in your face […] you get panicked and stuff, but when they slowly go through stuff step by step, one page [at a time], and, like, slowly build up to that big thing [at the end], and they explain it and you know everything before, it's really easy, and that's why I'm not so much anxious to learn new things, because it kind of builds up. That's a thing with this school that's done well."

I asked Macca to describe herself as a student, and she replied, "I would describe myself as – number one, a Beatle-maniac – loud when I can be. Like, in Cadets – I'm in Cadets and you have to be really loud, and we get to do all this really cool stuff […] so it's like a place where I have to be loud. And [at the Calgary Arts Academy] it's kind of like I feel shut off a little, because you have to impress people, like in every school, like, the stereotypes – you have to impress the stereotypes to be cool and stuff […] in this school you kind of have to keep a down-low of who you are, which kind of frustrates me, because it's an arts school. We don't have uniforms, we don't have to wear certain things … you should express yourself how you want, and not be ashamed that other people are going to judge you or something so, yeah. And I think that I'm weird. I think everybody is weird but some people don't realize it yet." Macca explained that she didn't feel she could express herself at school, but she could at Cadets. I asked her to elaborate, and she said "[a]t Cadets, I can't express myself fully there. We have uniforms, we have to take out our piercings, not wear make-up... so it's like, [growls], it's a drag. But I think that through Cadets, I'm, honestly, I don't mean to sound 'oooh look at me,' but I think I'm a tough person, like, um, because of Cadets. You definitely have to be tough to join and stuff, and, like, you have to be able to take a yell in your face, and you have to be able to take a hit or something and shake it off. And in field training you have to be able to suffer through extreme weather, and I think because [of that] it makes me stronger and confident and my love for people and everything, and … because before Cadets I was actually kind of lost, and right when I hit Cadets it was like 'whoa I need to be

more, I need to be more open and stuff' because that's what [pause] it's like challenging and stuff and I like challenges."

I asked Macca if she felt she had opportunities for leadership at the Calgary Arts Academy and she replied, "I don't think they really, like, explore that area much, because we don't really do civilian help and stuff and, like, we rarely do any of the helping-teachers-with-their-students and stuff … we do have a leadership class but it's not very leadership-y. It's basically just writing stuff down, and so I think this school would be *so* much better if people actually explored the leadership a little more, if there was more, maybe, classes on it or something, or more outings to clean up stuff, I don't know".

I asked what Macca liked about the Calgary Arts Academy, and she had this to say: "well I like the – I like how nice people are to you, the students – most students, like, are really nice to you and stuff – they're like 'I've been in your shoes, I am in your shoes actually, and I know how you feel, so let's just do this together'." I concluded our interview by asking Macca what she wanted to do after high school and she replied, "I'm going to cosmetic or hair […] school. And I'm going to go there and get my degree [in] hair and make-up and then I'm going to go either to Ottawa or L.A. to the special effects schools for movies and I'm going to specialize in special-effects make-up".

Discussion

In the section that follows I am going to use the work of Maxine Greene to inform a discussion of three areas that, in light of the preceding findings, seem particularly relevant; the three areas being art, imagination and community. Before doing so however I will broadly introduce the work of Maxine Greene and enter into a brief discussion on the topic of resilience, a topic that is necessary to consider. The work of Maxine Greene is extensive and could not be covered in its entirety here, consequently only a brief overview will be given. It is important to point out that in Greene's work, art, imagination and community are not distinct from one anther (although the can be spoken about individually), each theme in the triad is understood in tandem with the others. Thus, although I have separated each and attempted to talk about art, imagination and community individually, there is an intentional weaving and blurring of boundaries, a decision that is in keeping with a/r/tography.

Maxine Greene

Maxine Greene is an educator and philosopher who has over the years argued "strenuously for the presence of the arts in the classrooms" (Greene, 1995, p. 41). In her own writing and philosophizing, Greene models for her audience and students an engagement with artistic works of all sorts, showing how she uses works of fiction and poetry, painting, sculpture and dance, or pieces of music, to make sense of the world, deepen her understanding of her own experiences and help her see "with many eyes and not simply [her] own" (Greene, 1999). Rather than prescribing the ways in which we should engage with the arts, Greene (2001; 1999; 1995) focuses on describing why it is of paramount importance that we do engage, leaving the how up to us. In the following section, some of the reasons why Greene urges us to engage with the arts will be touched upon.

The ability to speak multiple languages (such as the language of the arts), states Greene (1995), will enable students to converse, work, plan and make things with others, and in doing so "attain some reciprocity of perspectives as they try to create networks of relationships within and among themselves" (p. 14). I suspect that Greene would say that this reciprocity of perspectives is complemented by art's ability to help us "see with many eyes and not simply [our] own" (Greene, 1999). Through this exchange of perspectives, and the practice of seeing ideas and experiences from many angles, our worlds open up and we can gain respect, understanding, and appreciation for others and the worlds they inhabit.

Yet the ability to converse in multiple figurative languages is more than building networks of relationships; "mastery of a range of languages is necessary if communication is to take place beyond small enclosures within the culture" (Greene, 1995, p. 14). Again, here, we have been presented with the idea of openings. In this world that is becoming increasingly diverse and complex, the ability to open ourselves up to the "variously lived" (p. 11) lives of others – including those within our own cities and neighborhoods and classrooms – is necessary, as is the capability to understand multiple forms of communication; for without this ability, we are closing ourselves off to the richness that exists around us and we are limiting our own ability to make sense of our worlds. Finally, Greene asserts, finding expression and articulation through a variety of modes, through imagery, movement, sound and so on, can enable students to "tap the full range of human intelligence" (p. 14). Without a doubt, this tapping of which she speaks will have positive ramifications, the least of which may be the feeling that one can more fully articulate and convey one's world to others.

As students create, feelings and perceptions otherwise hidden can be brought to the "surface of [their] consciousness." Thus the arts can create a complete, whole experience by engaging the intellect, as well as the emotions and perceptions of the individual (Greene, 2005, p. 121). The arts have a unique power to engage all students, especially those who have become bored or unmotivated. The arts can break through monotony and the mundane and can add "something new […] each day to a learner's life" (p. 41) and provide "the wonderful feeling of incompleteness, the feeling that there is always, always

something more" to be learned and discovered (Greene, 1999). According to Greene, the arts can foster relationships of reciprocity and understanding; they can open students' worlds, allowing them to more adequately express themselves and understand the variously lived lives of others, and they can engage our emotions and perceptions and hook us into the world of wonder, curiosity and incompleteness.

The power of the arts is more fully realized when imagination is nurtured and allowed to flourish. It is the imagination that, when released through "reflective encounters with the arts" and permitted to "play in the lived world," cultivates opportunities "to complete uncompleted meanings about [and for] young people" (Greene, 1999). When we allow ourselves to be fully present to a work of art, imagination becomes a conduit and we "cannot but find ourselves gazing at a face of the world never accessible before. That, too, expands our experience, moves beyond the painting and stirs us to construct new meanings, to enlarge what makes sense in the world" (Greene, 2005, p. 121).

Greene was adamant that we not have a passive or fatalist attitude toward life; she argued that we "always need to hope that things can be otherwise," and in working to name and resist things, to work for something better, we must be able to imagine it, we must be able to imagine a different life, a different reality (Greene, 2009). We must, she says, have what Ricoeur would call "a passion for the possible" (Greene, 2008). Imagination, Greene (2009) argued, "can be an antidote to the meaninglessness and boredom of today." It is imagination, she said,

that will help us "take arms against apathy and the mechanical life" (Greene, 2008a).

Imagination is pivotal because it has "to do with reorienting consciousness with opening new perspectives on the lived world" (Greene, 1999). To imagine is to engage in a "creative activity, a generative activity that opens us in unpredictable ways to our lived situations with all their deficiencies, opening spaces for new dialogue, new conversations about what is lacking, what ought to be replaced, what can be transformed" (Greene, 1999). To imagine also requires that we open ourselves up to the unexpected and the new, to "things we may never have seen" (Greene, 2008a). If we are open to it, imagination can lead to rapture and a break with the ordinary; it can promote discontinuity, disruption and "a vision of things being otherwise" (Greene, 2009). Thus, by promoting and fostering imagination, we are fostering students' sense of something more, something to work toward, something to hope for; we are fostering their ability "to perceive openings through which they can move" (Greene, 1995, p.11). And if a student can imagine something different, if they can imagine their life being otherwise, then imagination can be a way out of oppression and marginalization (Greene, 1995). Unfortunately, "far too seldom are such young people looked upon as being capable of imagining, of choosing and of acting from their own vantage points on perceived possibility" (p. 41). Instead, we impose labels upon students, forcing them to become the "recipients of 'treatment' or 'training,' sometimes from the most benevolent motives on the part of those willing to 'help'" (p. 41). Although Greene (1995) was speaking about impoverished

children, I believe we can apply her ideas to those labeled with learning disabilities. She writes that, in "focusing on remediation for these children, we overlook the ways in which imagination opens windows in the actual, discloses new perspectives, [and] sheds a kind of light" (p. 36). It is when we can treat students with due regard, with imagination and love and the attitude that they are "worthy human beings" that they will move "beyond themselves and [change] their very lives" (p. 40). "Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty space between ourselves and those we teachers have called 'other' over the years" (p.3). By crossing this 'empty space' and fostering our ability to connect with others we take a step toward building a form of community. As such, the absence of imagination "results in an incapacity to create or even participate in what might be called community" (p. 37).

This notion of community is one that Greene returns to on a number of occasions. These communities are dynamic and Greene (1995) urges us, when thinking about these communities, to emphasize "the process words: making, creating, weaving, saying, and the like" (p. 39). If we think of community in these terms, in terms of process, then it follows that a "community cannot be produced simply through rational formulation nor through edict. Like freedom, it has to be achieved by persons offered the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make intersubjective sense" (p. 39). To return briefly to this notion of imagination and openings, communities, Greene (1995) argues, "ought to be a space infused by the kind of imaginative awareness that enables those involved to imagine alternative

possibilities for their own becoming and their group's becoming" (p. 39). Thus, in addition to always being in process, communities should be welcoming spaces for diverse people to come as they are, incomplete and "in process, each one in search," each one desiring to "come together in their diversity to make meaning in their variously lived worlds" (Greene, 1999).

In order to foster these communities in our classrooms, which is necessary, Greene (2008) asserts, if we are to confront the moral and political crises of these exceptional times, then we need to create environments where we can pose difficult questions and where there is an "acknowledgement of the unanswerable," these environments need to be "provocative and sustaining, environments where we can talk about the community in the making" (Greene, 2008). Our classrooms thus have to be

> nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each on stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility (Greene, 1995, p. 43).

Making Sense Of Stories

Resilience

Resilience literature unequivocally demonstrates that the presence of a single caring adult can mitigate the impact of negative experiences in a youth's life (Grace 2009; Knight, 2007). When there is an absence of at least one caring adult as perceived by a student, their experience of life can be quite negative. This research is of particular relevance to the experience of Macca. A few months before I worked with the school, one of the teachers passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. This loss was, naturally, felt deeply by the whole community, but it was particularly significant for Macca. When Macca talked about this teacher, she said "that was the only teacher I […] really felt belonging to, and I could talk to and stuff. Yeah, that kind of sucks I guess" and later on "she would totally see past the studentness [*sic*] of it and go right to the friendship and who you really are, and that's why, yeah, [she's] one of the reasons why I actually stayed in this school." Macca's contradictory responses cannot be explained away simply by attributing her feelings to the sudden loss of the one teacher that she felt cared about her, the one teacher she felt connected to; it does provide some insight into why her experience was so different from the other participants. The loss of a caring adult can have a profound effect on a student, especially during the tumultuous time of adolescence. Thus, it is understandable that Macca's whole experience of school was deeply affected by this recent and personal loss.

Art

As they become more proficient in the various modes of expression and multiple literacies offered by the arts, students become able to express their worlds in multiple ways. When students feel like they can choose for themselves how to express and convey their realities to others, agency is fostered, as is a sense of belonging and competence. Within an arts-based environment, multiple modes of expression and articulation are honoured, and students are told that their way of seeing and expressing has a valued place in the community, and, by extension, so do they. Being thus situated, in an environment wherein students are regularly using various art forms and developing multiple literacies, it is not surprising that the participants in my research made comments indicating that they had a sense of self-efficacy and felt belonging, respect and safety while at school.

The arts can break through monotony and the mundane. As already mentioned, they can add "something new […] each day to a learner's life" (Greene, 1995, p. 41) and provide "the wonderful feeling of incompleteness, the feeling that there is always, always something more" to be learned and discovered (Greene, 1999). When we take this into consideration, we can make sense of dramatic changes in a participant's experience (as evidenced by comments such as "[this picture shows the] 'past' … I put an hourglass because I used to think my classes were so boring, and I'd just fall asleep and I couldn't wait to get out" and then, when asked to elaborate on a project that had contributed to his sense of belonging at school, the same student replied, "I guess any project, I just really like the school, they have good ideas").

As was mentioned previously, according to Greene, the arts can foster relationships of reciprocity and understanding; they can open students' worlds, allowing them to more adequately express themselves and understand the variously lived lives of others; and they can engage our emotions and perception, and hook us into the a world of wonder, curiosity and incompleteness. This provides one explanation for the numerous mentions made by participants of supportive friendships. When students share their worlds with others in an atmosphere where their knowledge and ways of expressing are honoured, not only can it create feelings of belonging, it can foster respect for others. Thus, as friendships grow in these environments where students are bringing themselves to the table, so to speak, the bonds between students are grounded in a respect and appreciation for the others as individuals with unique perspectives and competencies.

Imagination

When Greene (2009) posits that imagination "can be an antidote to the meaninglessness and boredom of today," and can help us "take arms against apathy and the mechanical life" (Greene, 2008a). I believe she means that with imagination, people can imagine lives for themselves that are different from those being imposed upon them by others. Imposed namely by our education system, a system rooted in the industrial model with the hidden agenda to create productive workers, productive in the economic sense. Within this system, where students are being conditioned and molded, imagination can prompt disruption. Using their

imaginations students can envision lives for themselves, lives they want to lead, lives that are uniquely theirs and different from their classmates. Each student who participated in my research spoke positively about his or her future. Each student desired something different for themselves, Macca wanted to pursue cosmetics and special effects make up for movies; Lucky wanted to pursue music and being a DJ and also study politics at university; Chuck wasn't sure what he wanted to do, however he was thinking about automotive engineering; Little R wanted to be a Broadway dancer; Gregory wanted to play guitar in a band; and ML wanted to travel for a few years and then go to university. The participants had clear goals and talked with certainty about positive futures for themselves. Even if they did not know precisely what they wanted to do after high school, they spoke with a sense of hope and possibility. They were able to imagine futures in which they were the protagonists of their own lives. They felt confident that they had (or would have when the time required) the competencies to achieve their goals, and consequently they had expectations for their future selves. The students' feelings of confidence in the present, and their expressed sentiments that their current situations are positive, are indicative of their feelings of competence in their current abilities. As the students speak about their futures they allude to openings. They speak in terms of the possible and the yet-to-be-discovered, which are essential aspects of communities in the making – the kind of communities we should hope and strive for in our classrooms, the kinds of communities that are formed in part through imagination (Greene, 1995).

Community

The students who participated in my research indicated, through their explicit comments, and by what they chose to share, that they felt comfortable being who they were. One spoke of being able to dance freely without fear of judgment or ridicule, another shared about living his Blackfoot culture, others spoke about how welcomed they felt in the school community. When the students talked about themselves, they also conveyed insightful recognition of their own strengths and challenges. It became evident that the students felt comfortable as they were, in process and in search. They showed a trust that in their community they could be as they were. It makes sense that in such an environment students felt comfortable talking about their challenges. When there is an acknowledgement that we are all in process, all incomplete and together creating a community that honours our difference and diversity, it is development, not perfection, that becomes important. Greene (1995) urges us to keep the 'process words' at the forefront of our thinking about community. The students, through their comments about supportive peers and teachers, indicated that the community they are in is one that is being actively cultivated, each day, as students and teachers come together to support and encourage each other; the culture of support is shaping the community.

Significance: Implications And The 'So What?'

At this stage it seems fitting to delve into a few pertinent questions. Why might it be important for the students who participated in my research to feel safe at school? Why might it be important that they feel that their ways of learning and expressing are honoured? Why should we be concerned about communities? Why is it important that they imagine unique futures for themselves? To find answers to these questions I turn again to Greene, as well as other critical theorists, namely McLaren and Freire. According to Greene (1995), the purpose of education "is to enable a human being to become increasingly mindful with regard to his or her lived situation – its untapped possibilities" (p. 182). She states that the languages and tokens we provide to students should create openings for possibilities and enable them to make sense of their world and to thematize it (Greene, 1995). She posits that

> since the languages at hand must live up to certain standards if those using them are to make their own experiences intelligible, we ought to enable students to enter into the needed languages responsibly and reflectively so that they can name themselves and name their worlds (Greene, 1995, p. 183).

Greene asserts that naming is an ongoing process, one that never achieves completion, and thus we must also strive to enable students to identify "the lacks and deficiencies that always have to be repaired" (Greene, 1995, p. 183). I believe Greene would agree with McLaren (1989), who states that "schooling for self and social empowerment is *ethically prior* to mastery of technical skills" (p. 161). The

'self' to which McLaren refers, I believe, is elaborated on by Greene when she speaks about education's purpose: to "enable a human being to become increasingly mindful with regard to his or her lived situation" (Greene, 1995, p. 182). We return again to the question of why. Why are these goals of Greene's and McLaren's important to this research?

As a result of the proliferation of neoliberal ideals, formal education in Canada is being marketized and increasingly standardized. Competition and individualism are promoted, knowledge is being commodified and students are being labeled with behaviour and social disabilities as well as learning disorders or exceptionalities if they do not match what is considered "normal" as defined by hegemonic decision-makers. Emphasis is placed on efficiency rather than efficacy, with those who do not 'fit the mold' being viewed as impediments to economic prosperity, which is a hallmark of neoliberalism. Within this structure of domination and conformation there exists "terrible silences where ordinary human speech ought to be audible, silences our pedagogies ought somehow to repair" (Greene, 1995, p. 47).

In the context of this research the participants might have been, in their previous schools, the ones whose voices were not heard. When they spoke of feeling rushed, constrained, unsuccessful or incapable, they alluded to their marginalization. Having taught four of the six participants, I can confidently declare that each was competent and able, yet when asked to think about their previous schools – schools that adhered to standards that labeled and pathologized students – all but one participant conveyed feelings of low self-efficacy. When we

impose labels upon students, especially labels that allude to learning or behaviour differences as deficiencies, we often then force them to become the "recipients of 'treatment' or 'training,' sometimes from the most benevolent motives on the part of those willing to 'help'" (Greene, 1995, p. 41). This yearning for the predictable, the measurable and the standardized is a response to the anxiety of our age (Greene, 1995). Regretfully, these young people, once labeled, are seen as being incapable "of imagining, of choosing and of acting from their own vantage points" (p. 41). This is because we see difference not as a strength but as a deficiency. The hegemonic ideology that steers our school systems encourages us to believe that all students need to learn in the same way and develop the same skills (thus the remediation and treatment). Differentiated teaching practices have been touted as progressive, yet students who learn and behave differently continue to be labeled, and standardized testing still caters to only one learning style and mode of expression.

I turn now to Freire (1993), who writes that teachers must look to those who are marginalized and, instead of seeking to integrate them, seek to transform the existing structures so that those same people can become "beings for themselves" (p. 55). This is what our pedagogies must promote. We must create environments where students can be empowered (McLaren, 1989) and "increasingly mindful with regard to [their] lived situation – [and] its untapped possibilities" (Greene, 1995, p. 182). So how do we do this? Although my research findings cannot be generalized, I believe that they are still significant. I furthermore believe that if a more extensive study were undertaken, the findings

from this research would prove true for a larger population of students. Essentially, what this research has demonstrated is that arts-rich pedagogy is one significant factor which contributes to the creation of spaces in which students' ways of expressing and knowing are honoured and legitimized, in which a passion for the possible is nurtured through imagination and in which students see themselves as champions of their own lives. Safe, supportive and nurturing communities are fostered where being in process is celebrated, and students feel confident and competent and able to learn. As was elaborated upon above, these findings are also prerequisites if students are ever to see themselves as the protagonists of their own lives, armed with knowledge, awareness and the language to name their worlds and act upon them as they feel moved to so do. If we do not foster this independence and agency in our students not only are we doing them a grave disservice, we are neglecting – even stifling – the development and progress of humanity as a whole, given that we are preventing a population of our society from realizing its innate potential – potential that could surely benefit us all. Like the cracks that create the opening for light to shine through in Leonard Cohen's "Anthem," we must not limit students by defining them by their deficits and lead them to believe that only 'perfect offerings' are adequate. Rather, our pedagogy must create openings through which the light of every student can shine brilliantly and wherein they can define for themselves the ways in which they will illuminate their world.

A memory about expectations for me dictated by a teacher who assumed and decided what I should be able to achieve…

It was grade three. We were studying architecture or house-building or something like that. I had to stay in during recess because I had not finished writing the notes from the chalkboard into my book. I felt like I would never be done. I felt overwhelmed. I felt exhausted by the task. I just wanted to be outside playing with my friends. I felt slow and frustrated. Why was I the only student who wasn't finished yet? I had tried as hard as I could to get the work done in class but it was too much for me. I had not goofed off with friends. I had tried to get my work done, really tried. I felt like I was being punished because I was not as fast as my classmates; it didn't seem fair.

A memory about belonging, perception of what is real and tangible to a child, my connection to the natural world and the markers of a physical landscape that for me signal home…

For me, as for many young children, the passing of time was an abstract concept. Also like many young children I would often ask my mother when my birthday was. The response – September 20th – told me nothing. I had no idea what or when September was, nor did the number 20 have any relevance for me. Confused, I would ask, "but when's September"?" Finally I was given an answer that made sense to me. I was told that when the leaves began to change colours and turn red, orange and yellow it would be close to my birthday. Living in Ottawa, a city well populated with maple trees, and being able easily to see the Gatineau Hills, which were blanketed by maples, the changing of the leaves was not something I could miss. Ever since that time, I've felt a special connection to the maple tree. When I'm around maples I feel at home; I feel comforted and secure.

Figure 9: Watercolour and stencil – Maple tree leaves

WINTER

Researcher Reflections

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of students who had, at one point in their schooling, been diagnosed with a learning disability and then transferred to the Calgary Arts Academy, an arts-based school. I wanted to look into how the students saw themselves as learners, and into their sense of self-efficacy in particular – their willingness to take academic risks while at school, and whether or not they felt belonging and support in their learning while at school. I also wanted to know what aspirations they had. In light of these goals there is admittedly little critique offered regarding the Calgary Arts Academy. This decision was made not because the Calgary Arts Academy is beyond reproach but because I did not feel that it was within the scope of this thesis to provide such a critique.

As veterans of a/r/tography may have foreseen, I have learned a lot more than I set out to discover. The more engrossed I became in the research process, the more fully I realized I could not separate myself from the work I was doing, and so it evolved into a project that was as much a self-study as it was a research project. The insights I garnered about myself emerged because of my commitment, early on, to an arts-based process – a process that was important because of my personal axiological sensibility. I have come to realize that I value a human aesthetic. That is, I value and want to understand the human experience. I want to know how phenomena are experienced by individuals; I want to know what values people hold dear and what they believe to be true. I want to know

how people make sense of the world, how they perceive and what they value. Perhaps most important to me is a yearning to hear peoples' stories, in their own words, and I want to come to know and understand my own story. I value arts-based research not because it has the potential to create beautiful art pieces but because the arts offer unique forms of expression and can engage us in the human experience in ways that no other method can; unearthing and shedding light on insights and knowledge that initially lie just out of reach of the conscious mind. A/r/tography allowed me to engage in arts-based research while honouring multiple aspects of my identity and learning more about myself as I did so. Although I value my personal growth, in the section that follows I share some reflections on the process of information gathering as well as branches to pursue in future research.

Possibilities For Future Research

Informed by what I value, my intent in doing this research was to understand the experiences of a handful of students within a particular demographic who were attending an arts-based school. As I expected and desired, the information I gathered does not permit me to make claims or generalizations about a causal relationship between arts-based pedagogy and students' experiences as learners. Although it is clear from the participants' stories that there was a distinct difference between the experiences they had at their previous schools and the experiences they were having at the Calgary Arts Academy, I cannot make the claim that the only factor influencing this change of experience was the arts-based

environment they were immersed in. The pedagogy of the Calgary Arts Academy rests firmly on four pillars, arts-immersion being one. It is reasonable to assume that the other pillars also impacted the students' experiences. Exploring the impact that the other pillars have on students' experiences of their schooling as well as how the four pillars work together and influence the school environment is a topic that could be pursued in future research.

Additionally, questions about the idea of school culture have come to intrigue me. Specifically, I am intrigued by the impact of a school's culture on students' values and interactions with each other and the school culture's (potential) ability to mitigate the influences of popular culture. This topic is prompted by an observation. While working with the student participants I noticed that the two participants who were newest to the school both had very different ideas about what it meant to be a leader and what success looked like (when contrasted with the four other participants). One of these newer students talked about school success in terms of social popularity or having lots of friends. When I asked him about leadership he was quick to associate it with being the leader of a group of friends; he viewed leadership as being at the top of a hierarchy of peers and they used phrases like 'getting to the top.' This sense of hierarchy and competition was not present in the comments made by the students who had been at the Calgary Arts Academy longer. Likewise, the second student, who had been at the school for just over a year, interpreted leadership as volunteering in the wider community by participating in what she called 'civilian help' (which she defined as helping those less fortunate than herself), whereas the

other four students who had been at the school longer interpreted leadership as assisting in the organization of an assembly or helping a classmate with their schoolwork. These observations invite us to examine not only the various influences that are impacting students' notions of leadership, but they also encourage us to think again about community. The students who had been at the Calgary Arts Academy saw leadership as something that happened within the school, the student who spoke about civilian help was thinking about how to reach out to the wider community and the student who spoke about hierarchies was seemingly influenced by popular neo-liberal culture which emphasizes competition and social hierarchy. Of course I did not gather enough information to draw any conclusions, however the observation did raise some questions that would be interesting to pursue.

Finally, I could not help but notice that of the six participants five were male and one was aboriginal. I would like to explore whether this sampling represents, as I suspect it does, the demographic of students who are being labeled with learning disabilities across Canada. Based on this observation, future work could include a systematic sociological examination of the students being labeled with learning disabilities in Canada.

Learning About Information Gathering

As I reflect on the information-gathering process, I observe the emergence of certain learning that were brought on by the limitations of this project. During the arts-based focus groups, it became clear that the time restrictions placed upon us

impacted both the design of the activities and the students' ability to delve deeply into them. Because the sessions were taking place during school hours I had to be cognizant of how much of the students' class time I was using up, and I had to consider that students might be absent from school (and consequently our sessions). Thus, it became clear that we could only spend one hour together each time we met, and this hour needed to include an introduction to the activity, time to work on it and enough time for each student to share their thoughts with the group. I felt it was important that we start and finish each project each day to avoid uncompleted projects due to unexpected absences. These restrictions dictated that I design activities that were fairly structured. It became clear that the high degree of structure was impeding the students' ability to express the full extent of their experience. In an ideal situation (a setting where I could have infinite time with the students) the projects would be more open-ended, not only in terms of the intent or direction of the project but in terms of the supplies available to students. Additionally, after I transcribed the information the students had shared with me, I had other questions for them – sometimes clarifying questions, sometimes questions about themes I had not anticipated and wished I could pursue further. Unfortunately, because of the distance between the research site and my workplace, and the design of the project, I was unable to return and spend more time speaking with the students. I had to work with the information I had and note additional questions that had emerged for future research.

Gratitude: Learning From The Students

After reading some of what has been written about students labeled with learning disabilities and behaviour challenges, and then working with the students who agreed to participate in this research, I found it hard to reconcile the two; the students I worked with neither reflected nor confirmed what the literature said about them (or students like them). This reaffirmed my belief that if we want students to thrive – not in terms of mastering basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, but in the sense of instilling the desire to engage with the world, to have a positive and strong sense of self-efficacy and possibility for themselves – then it is absolutely necessary that we stop pathologizing them. These students do not need to be fixed through remediation; the answer is not in the simplification of tasks (rote and structured learning with clear, measurable outcomes) but rather in an opening up and an embracement of the complex and the messy, the difficult to define, the unquantifiable. By embracing and welcoming the students as they were and not as individuals who needed to be remediated, I believe the Calgary Arts Academy created an environment where the students felt safe and, because of that sense of security, were able to become learners for themselves. They were not learning to prove to others that they could be capable or worthy but because they were *already* capable and worthy. It is this kind of environment that I believe will achieve the goals that we set out to accomplish through remediation. It is also this environment that will prompt students to become more than what we could direct them to become if we focused solely on the structured process of remediation in which students learn to follow and not take the lead. This approach requires that

we view students and teachers not as receptacles and dispensers of information but as individuals walking a path together and learning through reciprocal relationships.

In this spirit of reciprocity, and as adults opening ourselves up to be taught by those younger than us, I conclude by sharing an important lesson the students taught me. As I participated in the studio art course, I not only analyzed and visually explored the themes that had emerged by that point in the research process, I also noted my own experience of the process in a journal. One day I realized that I was experiencing extreme waves of exhaustion and tirelessness and these waves coincided with times when I either felt stressed and overwhelmed or galvanized and inspired. When I experienced the low moments, the moments of exhaustion and stress, I became almost paralyzed. I felt so exhausted that if it had been socially acceptable I may have curled up on the ground and fell asleep right then and there; I wanted to shut down, and, if anyone had asked, I may not have been able to tell them my own name. On the other hand, when I felt inspired, I was able to work the wee hours or the morning without feeling anything but focus and an unending supply of energy. In light of these realizations I began to think about students' experiences at school. I wondered … how often do we think that students are slow or unable to grasp a concept when what is hindering them, primarily, is stress? What would happen if we could remove a significant amount of stress and pressure from the schooling experience? Would we perceive that students were suddenly more capable?

By sharing their stories with me, the students who participated in this research helped me draw these connections between what I was experiencing in the studio arts course to experiences they described having at their previous schools. Through their candor they helped me link my experiences to theirs and consequently garner new insights. Finally, the students' reminded and showed me what it means to take risks and be vulnerable. They each participated wholeheartedly in the activities I designed and without hesitation shared their stories with me (and with each other); they spoke about their passions, their hopes and dreams, their strengths and struggles with candour and insight. Through the example they set, the students taught me about courage, vulnerability and risk-taking. During this thesis process, the moments when I felt most challenged were the times when I began to question whether I was 'doing it right,' to doubt myself and worry about what others would think, to second-guess my observations and the insights that emerged from the artistic process. The only way to overcome the writer's block and debilitating uncertainty I periodically experienced was to follow the example set by the students: to trust myself and take risks in the telling of this story. Thus, this thesis is a manifestation of my own vulnerability; it would not have been honourable to expect the participants to take risks when I myself was not willing to do the same. Through their examples the students showed me the way and helped me act upon the convictions I held.

Although this thesis is being submitted in a form that conveys completeness and finality, I do not view this journey as being complete. As I move forward I will carry this story with me and, without a doubt, circle back to it

more than once, each time seeing it with new eyes, eyes that I hope continue to be wide open.

A memory about empowering students by the simple act of trusting them …

My undergraduate degree was a positive experience. I was interested in the courses I took and I enjoyed my classes. If you had asked me, I would have described myself as an average student, I did not do badly but I did not do really well either. Although I got quite excited about many of my papers, being genuinely interested in the topics, my assignments felt like they were little more than a requisite hoop all students had to jump through, a way to differentiate us from each other. Despite the fact that I have always enjoyed writing, I can only remember the contents of one paper I wrote during my first three years; only one paper left an impression on me. In my final year I took a course on aboriginal pedagogy through the department of Native Studies in my anticipation of pursuing a Bachelor of Education after completing my undergraduate degree. This course had a profound impact on me. I was deeply touched by both the course material and the assignments. For our final exam, we were asked to create something that represented our learning in the course. Our piece had to be accompanied by a written statement, and we had to share and describe our piece to our classmates on the final day. Some students felt overwhelmed by the freedom we had been given. I, on the other hand, felt liberated and inspired, and I could barely contain my excitement. For the first time ever I felt like I would actually be able to articulate what I had learned. In the end I choose to do an oil painting. I had never worked with oil before but I was not worried. The act of asking us, the students, to create something unique and individual – a gesture that, to me, conveyed trust and a transfer of ownership and power from the professor to us – created a sense of security for me, and that feeling of being trusted enabled me to take what others considered to be a risk and work with a medium I was unfamiliar with.

A memory about how perceptions can influence the stories we tell ourselves …

Recently I was on the phone with my mother, updating her on the progress of my thesis. I happened to mention a few of the memories that I was planning on including and we began to talk about my own experience of schooling. When I mentioned the experience of being labeled with a learning disability in high school she replied by explaining that her understanding of events was quite different. She does not recall a formal diagnosis or label being given to me; she does remember me being tested and the findings being that I learned differently. What was it about that experience that made me think that I had been diagnosed with a learning disability? From that point onward, having a learning disability was part of my identity. It became part of my story. Regardless of what actually happened, both my mother and I walked away from that situation with two different understandings, two different ideas about what was true and real. Does it matter whose understanding was more accurate? Perceptions are powerful; they shape the stories we tell ourselves, and these stories become our truths, shaping how we live our lives and influencing how we see ourselves in relation to those around us.

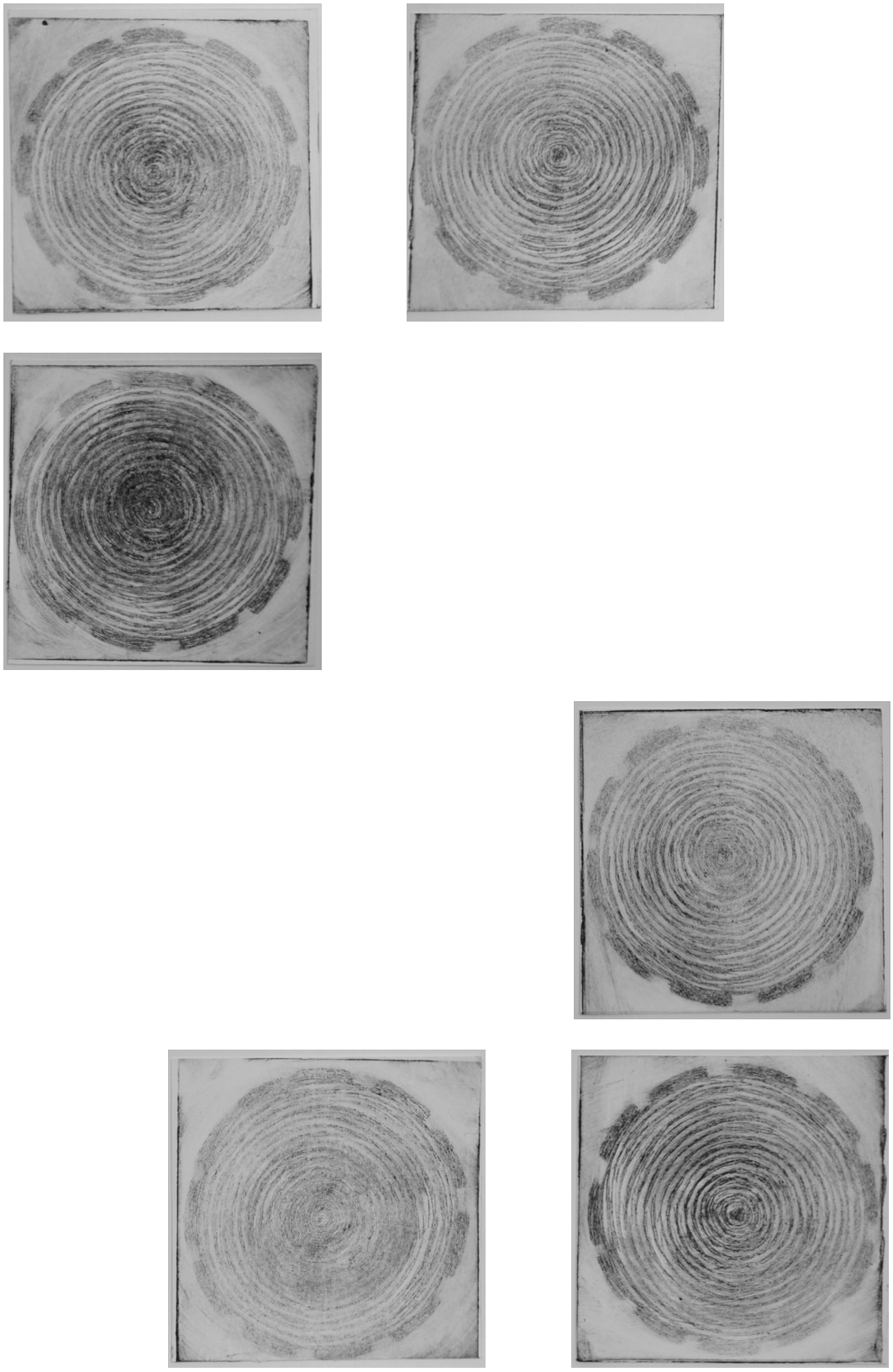


Figure 10: Etching on Plexiglas – Cross section of a maple tree trunk

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Appendix: A photo journey of my embodied practice