

University of Alberta

**“Two-Stones” Stories: Shared Teachings Through the Narrative Experiences of
Early School Leavers**

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research study was to inquire into the experiences of youth who leave school before graduating with a high school diploma. Statistical measures and quantitative data compiled on school leaving identify early school leaving as an issue that is prevalent in society. The long term effects of not having a high school diploma are well known and include both social and economic impacts. The phenomenon of leaving school before graduation is a global phenomenon. The identification of trends and patterns using statistical analysis in current studies on school leaving rarely consider the individual stories of youth. Through the use of narrative inquiry as a methodology this study inquires into the life and school stories of three youth who left school before graduating. Narrative Inquiry is a relational methodology that allows for an inquiry into the experiences of youth. While the larger statistical patterns provide a backdrop for this research, this study carefully attends to the details of each youth's life and creates a space for the voices of the youth. The youths' narratives in conjunction with the researcher's autobiographical reflection were woven throughout the data collection and analysis as well as in the research text. In this way, the research texts create wonders for a variety of audiences. Through the narrative inquiries into the life and school stories of the participants, several threads are identified, providing opportunity for further reflection on current school policies and practices. The research study shows that the life and the school stories of youth are not separate but are interrelated in ways that add to the complexity of the issues facing youth in contemporary school settings. The impact of early school leaving and the issues surrounding narrative conceptualizations of identity are key considerations.

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The longest journey is from your head to your heart.

Elder Bob Cardinal

I have had a dream to study and complete my master's degree for many years. I am on the cusp of something revolutionary and life changing, even if it's just my simple story and path. I feel I am getting to a different place, even if it's just in my mind and thoughts. I tell the students I work with that if we get our education, no one can take it away. It becomes our story and our family story, a future story, one that can impart change, even if it's just within ourselves.

In thinking about all the good people who have helped me on my learning journey, I first want to acknowledge the project research team. Thank you, Dr. Claire Desrochers, for taking me for a tea and inviting me to work with you and learn. Thank you, Dr. George Buck, for helping me in your role as a thesis advisor. Thank you, Dr. Vera Caine and Dr. Florence Glanfield, for being advocates and supports for me as I continue to learn in this new way. And thank you to The Comma Police™ for editing my work.

I want to point home and thank all the good people at Montreal Lake Cree Nation who have helped me by funding part of my work. I will bring this work back home as we work together to move youths forward at Montreal Lake—educationally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I will come home to help this part of my “two stones” story.

I thank the youths and families I have worked with for sharing their stories. The stories have passed through my mind often as I tried to make sense of the narratives and complexities that exist within the stories of life and school.

I thank the dear friends and colleagues for listening over a cup of coffee or a tea, talking and rehashing ideas that can shape our classrooms, exchanging stories. I am thankful for new friendships with certain older ones and Elders, like Bob and Isabelle who are helping me to “look sideways” when I work with youth, and to look this way within myself as I try to make sense of the stories inside me.

I am thankful for mentorship that came to me in so many different ways, and in different locations, quite possibly when I needed it the most. It happens. I am thinking of my dear friend Laurel, my first mentor and a person who crosses my mind often. Much of the work I am doing is because she took a chance many years ago, training me, listening, and helping me believe in this forward looking story. Thank you.

The place where I am now is significantly different from what it looked like two years previous. I wandered aimlessly at the U of A trying to find a place that made sense in my studies. I finally found that place at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development. In this place I sit at a table with people from around the world and discuss educational issues. In this place I sit once a week with a new friend and mentor, Dr. Jean Clandinin, who helped me to find my way, become awake to what I had not known, to find a spirit within myself that believes. I believe her when she tells me that I can create a new forward looking story. I am starting to see it! Thank you, Dr. C.

Finally, I go back to my home place, to my mom and dad and brothers and sisters. Many of the stories I write come from this place and have been an opportunity for healing

within myself. I write many of the stories with an image in my mind of my father, a wise man in life and one who continues to impact my heart. I hope by writing these stories that my two daughters, Kamaya and Sedona, and my dear wife, Jaleen, will come to know you the way I knew you. I am hoping that my girls will read these stories when they get older and do some “sideways looking” to help them on their life journeys.

I wish you all peace.

Sean Lessard

July 3, 2010

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Prologue

Part of my self depends on my being able to go backward and forward in time and weave a story about who I am, how I got that way, and where I am going, a story that is continuously nourishing and self sustaining. Take that away from me and I am significantly less. In the final analysis, living only for the moment, I am not a person at all. (Spence, 1983, p. 457)

Early School Leavers: Project Overview

Many youths in Alberta's school systems leave before obtaining a high school diploma, and the related research is expansive. Often looking to statistics to explain why youths leave school early, the research provides opportunities for understanding the phenomenon and seeing important patterns and trends. However, information gleaned from the numbers suggests answers that are only partial because they do not attend to the lives of the individuals who are lost in the data—categorized without name, face, or story. I wonder as I look through the various reports why individual stories are not considered. I think about the many youths I have worked with in the past who have left school early, and as I search for answers through the literature, I realize how limited a number or chart is in defining their stories.

The study grew out of the need to understand and improve the experiences of children and youths in schools. Many past studies have looked at children and youths' life experiences in and out of school. This study focused more directly on the life and school experience of youths who leave school early, without a diploma. The study

examined the experiences of 20 youth from Alberta who left school early between the ages of 18 and 21.

The research inquired into the youths' experiences in and out of school and provided voice and an opportunity to hear their perspectives. My master's study is nested within the larger project; I had an opportunity to walk alongside three youths as they shared their school-life stories. I look at the stories and experiences of youths as opportunities for learning and reflection as I move forward in my teaching and academic career. The research study, which included stories from the youths and an opportunity to participate with a team, has helped me find a place of comfort. In looking back at the experience and process I have been a part of, I recognize the importance of learning from the people around me and can see that my academic path and place in the university was not always so clearly in front of me.

Chapter 1

Narrative Beginnings: “Two Stones” Stories

My given name is Sean Michael Lessard. I am the middle child in a family of five. I grew up in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, on a farm; it was a special place where I learned from the land and the rhythms of life that are nestled within the rural landscape. I have many stories of my farm that captures the spirit of the harvest and our relationship to the land. Living life on the farm taught me lessons through lived experiences, showing me how to deal with people honestly and the importance of shaking hands, lending help to people when needed, and respecting the community members who share a common rural purpose. The physical place where I grew up provided the opportunities and the foundation that have shaped my identity.

My birth name is Harvey Curtis Settee from the Kingfisher family. I am the youngest member of this family. I have two older sisters and one older brother. My home is on a reserve in Central Saskatchewan and is situated on a lake surrounded by dense forest; it has many proud stories and traditions. My mom is a cook and she works in a bush camp near the reserve. My family members have a long history in this area and many of them are the political and spiritual leaders of the community. I am learning about life in this place and their values and protocols. I am learning when to talk and when to listen, the importance of helping and honouring the older ones, the power of stories, and what it means to give and receive gifts. Life in this community has also provided opportunities for me and is shaping my foundation and adding to my existing identity.

Solo Journey to My “Home Place”

I started off in life not knowing the way of cultural teachings, and I struggled to find a comfortable identity. Through time and a willing spirit I am learning about the past and my people. I have started to grow through teachings shared with me. For the past 5 years I have embarked on a solo journey to my shared homes—the place where I was born and the place I grew up. Both places provide opportunities to learn and reflect on the life I am creating.

When I go back to the farm I pay respect to my father’s land and take time at an old oak tree. It is in this place where I turn inwards and say a few words to a life that has passed on. I try my best when I return home to update him on the journey I have been taking and the good and bad that life offers. I spend time in this place so I don’t forget the stories. This land helps me, it grounds me, it heals.

After I spend a day at the farm I continue down the road. As I drive the landscape changes, moving from the vast wheat fields to the shadows of trees and the traditional lands of Treaty Six and the Woodland Cree. When I drive back to my reserve I often form pictures in my mind and wonder what life was like on the land. I think of the older ones and my ancestors. I wonder if we were similar people. Were there people like me?

An integral part of my solo journey is the annual Elders’ retreat and fish fry that celebrates the harvest. I go back to Montreal Lake to serve the Elders on this day of honour and reconnect with the members of my community. The trip back to my dual homes is a vital part of who I am becoming and one of the few traditions I consistently celebrate.

I started my life in foster care; I was adopted from the reserve when I was 2 years old into a non-aboriginal family. My identity continues to develop and it is shaped by lived experiences and evolving multiple identities, which honour both pasts and guide my future journeys.

Intersecting Worlds

On the farm my dad would often take walks on his land, sifting through the soil, carefully analyzing the future of his crops. In the fields he often found artifacts from the Cree people who once inhabited the land. I remember the two hammer stones (mauls) he uncovered. He showed me how they were used as tools to grind down meat and grains. One of the stones was grey and the other brown. I could see how, through time and use, distinct markings and grooves were formed in the rocks. Eventually, the storied tools found their place on a shelf in his closet. I never gave much thought to the two stones that occupied that place. Their true meanings evolved as I grew older. Many years later when I would come home from university, I often had vibrant discussions with my dad about the stories of the past and the history of First Nations Peoples. I was always excited to share the stories that I was learning about myself and my people. I remember many great conversations and talking at length about the treaty process and residential schools; he always had questions for me and I did my best to answer them.

A specific weekend trip home stays with me in my mind. I was getting ready to leave and go back to the city for school. I put my jacket on and opened the closet door; on the shelf were the two stone tools. They were moved to a place that was clearly visible.

My dad reached up on the shelf and gathered the stones in his hands, telling me to take care of them. Like many of our conversations the message was simple and powerful. Throughout my travels the only possessions that I have retained from the farm are my two stones. I realize how important they are. They represent my worlds and the shared paths that often intersect in my developing story.

My dad was not an educated man. He finished school in Grade 6 to start work on the farm. This is the way it was; there was not an option or an alternate path for him. Despite his lack of formal schooling he had wisdom that books cannot teach. Most importantly he understood his kids and the importance of nurturing their individual spirits. I understand, as I get older, that my dad knew the power of the two stones and what they would mean to me. After my dad passed away my family decided to hold an auction. Family members had a chance to take items of importance before the sale, and some argued over his possessions. I chose not to attend this event, feeling that the two stones he gave me before this difficult time were the greatest gifts: the shared stories between two people and a visual representation of our intersecting worlds.

Feeling Comfortable in My Own Skin

I look back at the times past when I waited for my dad to come in from the field after a long day's work. I sat on the front porch with his old blue ball glove, eager to throw and show the movement I had in my new pitches. I recall the seasons passing and my dad watching me progress as a pitcher and playing on competitive sports teams, talking about how to pitch to certain players and how to throw the ball inside to make

players back off the plate. The greatest memories are the conversations and the stories shared, not the actual games.

The summer also was a time to learn about freedoms and responsibilities. My dad taught me how to carefully prepare traps and about basic outdoor skills such as fishing. I remember different physical areas of the farm, where animals such as the badgers that lived near the dugout or the fox and its little ones claimed land near the fort I built. I recall my dad showing me the fox den and admiring the hard work that was put into this creation. I could have easily crawled into the den, as it was tunneled deep into the ground, no doubt a great area to raise a family.

Sports, a thread that has run through the multiple layers of my life, has offered me an opportunity to fit in and be part of a group. Throughout my school story I was involved in numerous sports and I recall the games I played as being the single most important reason for going to school. I enjoyed seeing my friends and I developed a deep connection with many of them, which carried throughout my school experience.

Recess was my favorite part of the day, and I remember running out to the field and playing sports with a group of friends, developing relationships that created comfort. It did not matter what people wore or what color my skin was; the recess games were open invites to participate, without judgment. I am fortunate that I found activities that I loved and that allowed me to blend in and complement the collective group. Even back then it was apparent that belonging was important to me and that it could be nurtured through sports. It becomes evident to me as I reflect on this that my dad recognized this all along and, in his own way, created an outlet for its expression.

Stories of a Barn: The Importance of Place

The physical place provided an opportunity for learning. The greatest area of the farm was one that my dad introduced to me when I was 9 years old. At our farm we had a barn with a loft filled with old bales and junk and no longer used. My dad and I spent a day cleaning out all the old remnants. He put plywood around the curved walls and carefully installed new lights. He hung a basketball hoop on one wall and then brought up my hockey net so I would no longer have to chase a ball around by myself, and no longer would my mom be mad at me for marking up the garage door. My dad created a place where I could play, one that any kid would be proud of. On that day he created more than a gym for his son.

When I look back at this, I wonder if my dad was getting tired of playing catch. Perhaps he was teaching me in another way, encouraging me to develop, creating a sanctuary. I do know that this was the best place for me growing up. The barn was a special place where I imagined myself to be a professional athlete, where I had my own thoughts and feelings, and where I was untouchable; nothing could bother me in this place. I grew up in this place. I spent countless hours in all seasons playing sports by myself, moving, thinking, playing, being a kid. When I think of the meaning this place held for me and compare it to places other youths might claim, I realize that many of them did not have a haven in school or at home, lost to them or removed from them impacting who they were becoming.

I remember going back to the barn 2 years ago after a long absence, and like all things, it had become older. It had not aged gracefully. A number of my things were just as I left them, unchanged, timeless, a memorial preserved. Many fell victim to change. My net still existed but it was covered with pigeon droppings; posters I had hung up were now weather beaten; the doors to the loft were torn off their hinges; the shingles and paint were withered; the basketball hoop was half ripped down. Despite all the ugliness I could easily picture how proud this place used to be, and how many pretend games were played on that wood floor. No one could take away those stories.

Healing Stories

I like thinking about the idea that “no one could take away those stories.” I am thinking of those words and how I am describing some of the stories of the past. Many of the stories have sat idle and life has continued to pass by without me taking the time to reflect on them. I recently sat with an Elder named Isabelle, who talked to me about her love of nature. She lives in a place with many different trees and goes for long walks that she calls “silent walks.”

She walks softly in the forest and quietly and deeply listens to the sounds all around her. She told me she gets to a place of comfort on her walks and tries to even hear what the trees are saying. I believe that the opportunity to study at the university has provided me a chance to walk in silence and pay closer attention to the details of my life as I move forward in relation to the research and the people around me. Looking backward in time requires me to go to a place in my mind and quietly reflect on times

past, even as my mind wants to race forward and think of the present details of life and wonders of the future. My mind is always shifting through the stories, images, and memories that led me to this place at the university. I am thinking about the past because I am wondering what brought me to the place of education and more specifically to the stories of me becoming a teacher.

Looking at Life Through Jackets

As a current high school teacher I often think back to what life looked like for me growing up. I try to remember. I sit in silence and see if I can form a picture in my mind of some of the memories created in my school days. I look back at high school and try to put myself in a situation where I know what young people were thinking, and then I try to relate to them as a teacher in the present. I often go back to a feeling of disconnection and a feeling of putting in time with little vision for the future as I recall this period in my life. I can see myself and remember many stories, but rarely can I find a sense of my place in the stories of school. I lack connection. As I remember, in high school I tended to be more interested in the social elements over the academic requirements. I don't blame the school, the organization, or the teachers within it. I look at myself and struggle to see who I was and what I stood for at this point in time.

I was a student who drifted through high school, constantly trying to find my way. Now that I look back I can see how I had struggled at various times with trying to figure out who I was as a person. I knew from as far back as I can remember that I was adopted and that I was from an aboriginal community somewhere near Prince Albert,

Saskatchewan. I always had questions about the past, but I learned from the environment around me that it was best to keep this story to myself and do my best to fit in. I always knew I was different, but as a young person I disliked this part of my life and the confusion that it created. I did not like being different. I think I felt like many of the students I have come to know in my current school landscape.

Growing up in Saskatchewan, I had the opportunity to play hockey from a young age. It seemed, at this time, the most important part of my life was the hockey jacket and the group mentality that often accompanied it. People who played on a hockey team often received a jacket with their name and position on it. This signified to others what level of hockey they played and who they represented. I recall getting a jacket every single year. Some were leather, some made of different materials. They were in different colors, but always hockey jackets, with Bruins, Barons, Titans, Three Stars, or Knights proudly etched across the back and front. I wore my hockey jacket at school, out of school, and all the in-between spaces. The jacket trumpeted to those around me that I belonged, and that I had a place. The jacket was much more than a practical winter necessity. It was a sense of identity and a source of social merit to those who belonged to the group.

I look at my old hockey jackets, rolled up in a trunk sitting in my basement, and I think about the stories I must have been trying to live out in the school landscape. I was always trying to fit in and be part of a group so the emphasis would shift from me, the individual. I was always surrounded by friends. We always wore our hockey jackets, as a group, a collective, all on the same side. I suppose, in some ways, I wanted to remain faceless and hide behind the colors and so-called powers of the jacket. I can look back

now and see things differently; I understand many of my students and their stories because I can see them when I look at those jackets.

Shifting Forward

One of the strongest beliefs I have in my current teaching practice is the importance of connecting with students. I take time to try and understand a small piece of their stories and their family stories. My belief comes from a place and relates to how I felt during my high school years, more disconnected than connected. I am fortunate that I had the opportunity to make my way through high school and move eventually into graduate studies. I look back on the stories of my brothers and sisters from the reserve, whose paths were much different. I try to remind myself of this when I work with youths and when I hear their stories of life, with school just being one small part of it. My motivation and energy for working with aboriginal youths comes through the past experiences I have had. I try to put myself in the place of the students who attend a school similar to the one I attended when I was young, a large institutional place, one that can easily become a building and not a home place for learning and staying.

Coming to Narrative Inquiry

The stories of the past weave their way throughout my life and the journey I am currently on in graduate school. The past never leaves me as I reflect on my graduate studies and more specifically on a research methods course where we went through a lesson on the various types of research. At this point in my studies, I did not have any

idea on what I could possibly research and felt increasingly lost on my path. I look back now and can still recall the explanations and examples provided in the class that shared some basic ideas involved in narrative inquiry. I remember hearing the professor explain the idea of listening to people's stories about their lives, and I instantly became more hopeful and excited to hear about this methodology. I remember the feeling I had in class and knowing that something inside me was telling me that this was right.

I talked to my professor after class and he lent me a book that explained the methodology in more detail. I was hoping to find my place in the university and a path that made sense to me in the understanding of educational issues. I met the author of the book later that week; months later, I became part of my first research team, engaging in research that would become my thesis using narrative inquiry. As I write this, I still cannot believe that I have found a way of coming to know and understand knowledge that I can relate to on a personal, social, and cultural level. It provides me a way to see the world differently, and for that I am thankful, that I have found a place to help me understand.

Research Puzzle

Reflecting on my own experiences has brought me to my current research, in which as a member of a research team I have had the opportunity to inquire into the stories of youths who leave school early. The research puzzle is one that I can relate to despite joining the team after the question was formulated. The research question is, How did leaving school early shape youths' lives and how did their lives shape their early

school leaving? It is a phenomenon that I wonder about often in my teaching career, as I have seen many students enter the physical place and leave at various points. I think of the students long after they are gone, and the questions consume my mind as to what I could have done differently or what the school could have done to shift the story. The question is really a part of me and a part of what I have engaged in since my early work in the community, before I considered myself a teacher. The community helped me to learn about myself and to advocate for people. The research puzzle is a part of that work on how leaving school can shape a life and how a life can shape school leaving. I question the institution and try in my teaching to hear the stories of the individual; unfortunately, our schools are not doing this enough. Policy and rules sometimes inhibit the ability to hear to the stories of youth. Attendance checks and attendance boards are useful, but without engaging in a relationship with the youth, many words are lost and time is spent on reactive measures. I truly believe this, which is why the research question speaks to me. I am thrilled I have found a place at a university that allows me to make sense of stories that have been in me for a long time.

Chapter 2

Learning to Think Narratively

Narrative inquiry is a view of

human experience in which humans individually and socially lead storied lives.

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

From this I understand that narrative inquiry is both methodology and phenomenon. It is both a way to study experience and a way to view experience as a narrative phenomenon. Narrative inquiry is the qualitative methodology that I used to inquire in to the lives of youths who have left school before graduation. Engaging in a study using narrative inquiry as the methodology required collaboration and the building of relationships between myself and the youths who agreed to participate in the study. Narrative inquiry provides ways for people to share and make meaning of their lives, understand the experiences they are living, and tell stories of that living.

Learning to think narratively allowed me to sit alongside youths and share the stories of school by looking back at our experiences together. Through the sharing process and co-creation of our school and life stories, theirs and mine, our relationship began to shift and opened a space for conversations. We walked together in conversation

and helped each other make meaning of the stories we had lived, now told to each other and which we were beginning to retell.

The methodology encouraged me to look inside myself and recall past experiences which helped me in the formation of relationships with the youths and my understanding of our evolving stories. Narrative inquiry provided a way to work with people differently, one that attends to the details of a life and honours the stories that continue to shape the life. Through the use of narrative inquiry I relied heavily on my personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 25), shaped in part by working with youths in various capacities throughout my lifetime. I looked within myself and inquired into my own stories to help me attend to the stories of youths. Despite the difficulties in turning inward and reflecting, it helped me to come to a deeper understanding as the youths and I moved forward through telling and re-telling.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) helped me as a beginning researcher to further understand and reflect on the inquiry process when they explained,

As we worked within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, we learned to see ourselves as always in the midst located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social. But we see ourselves in the midst in another sense as well; that is, we see ourselves as in the middle of a nested set of stories—ours and theirs. (p. 63)

The first part of this quotation turns my attention to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 77). The

second part draws my attention to the relational aspect of narrative inquiry and how, as we engage with participants, there is a co-construction of our stories.

The first dimension, temporality, involves attending to a life by looking at the past, present, and future. As a narrative inquirer, I listened carefully to the stories the youths shared with me, and I tried to honour their words as they spoke them. Hearing their stories helped me travel back to my school days and to reflect on them intimately (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; hooks, 1994). As I did this, I wondered if, when, and how my personal journey and stories could have been altered. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind me of the importance of temporality in the inquiry process: “When we see an event, we need to think of it as happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future” (p. 29).

The second dimension in the narrative inquiry space, sociality, is described as both the personal and social conditions. As a narrative inquirer I need to be aware of the personal and social conditions and the ever-changing landscape that shapes this part of the inquiry process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain personal conditions as “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions of both the inquirer and study participants. By social conditions we mean the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise that form the individual’s context” (p. 50).

Thinking about the sociality dimension in this way reminds me that my past experiences and ways of understanding and seeing the world comes from the places I have lived. The physical landscape cannot be ignored. As I put my experiences growing

up in relation to the stories of the youths, I recognize the differences. My story of being adopted and growing up on a farm in a non-aboriginal family away from my past is a dominant thread. As I grow older I have become more comfortable in learning about the history of my family and a story that lives within me about culture and being comfortable in my own skin. The stories I am coming to know in my own life are much different contextually than the stories I learned when listening to an aboriginal youth who had left school early. This girl's story of school and place is different, much different as she moved in and out of the reserve school system. Her transition in and out of the reserve system and the experiences of learning in her home place are relevant to us both; they impact her experience and they also shape how I am learning to listen to the stories of youths. Our experiences are vastly different, despite both of us being aboriginal people. Attending in these way makes the details of each individual life significant.

The third dimension is place. It is the "specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of place, or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 49). Place is the physical location where stories are both lived and told. The sharing of stories, as well as how I am learning to hear them, is shaped by place in both a physical and spiritual sense. The sharing of stories occurs in many physical places, which impacts the types of conversations and the process of inquiry. Place allows for conversations to become open or closed based on past experiences and relationships that encourage or discourage sharing. As I began to think about place, I wondered about the conversational places and the details of attending to place in our stories. "There is a geography that lives in all our stories, how we hear them

and how we understand them” (Dr. Vera Caine, personal communication, November 20, 2009).

The youths I have to come to know through the research project were impacted by place, in that we travelled together to different locations to share stories of the past but also that we travelled in our minds back to locations we have lived in the past, and that shape the way we hear and tell our stories in the present (Lugones, 1989). Place allows me to think of conversation in a different way; it has a grounding effect that helps me to inquire into the stories that are shared.

Thinking About Place

Who I am as an aboriginal teacher on the school landscape shapes my relationships and sometimes my ability to hear the stories of youths. I realize as a narrative inquirer that my past experience shapes how I hear others’ stories. I understand the perceived aboriginal story we do share, but I also see great differences in our individual stories of life and school. I continue to remind myself that there is no one aboriginal story of school despite the position I often find myself in, such as when colleagues ask me, “What is wrong with my kids?” and “How come your kids don’t attend school?” I struggle with the balance that I need to find in my response.

On one hand, I want to advocate strongly and become the voice for aboriginal students in the school setting where I work. On the other hand, I continue to emphasize to other staff members that these students are not my kids; they are all our kids and we all share responsibility to help them on their way. I am finding a place of comfort on the

school landscape and often remind colleagues and friends that there is no one aboriginal school story and there is no one aboriginal teacher story. We all come from different places and we must listen to find where that place is. The idea of place shapes who I am as a person, and I draw on this reflectively to help me understand more clearly the stories that rest within me and also the stories of youths that I have come to know within the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Silko, 1996).

Telling and Retelling (Learning to Listen and Re-listen)

In the process of coming alongside the youths, I began to hear them tell their stories at the same time as I was telling mine. Working within the three-dimensional space, we told our stories of our lives. When I went away to read and reread the field texts, I began to inquire into the stories within the three-dimensional inquiry space, being attentive to temporality, sociality, and place. Through the inquiry—into our stories and the retelling of our stories—I began to compose tentative narrative accounts to be shared in further conversations. Through this process, the inquiry became more shared between us. Now as we move forward and away from the intimacy of those relationships, we both begin to relive new stories.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain the inquiry process and its holistic approach to understanding by looking inward, outward, forward, and backward: the four directions of inquiry (p. 77). The inquiry process allows me to look inside myself and inquire into the stories I am both sharing and hearing. There exists a certain interconnectedness and interdependence in this process of reflection, key teachings in

both the narrative and indigenous approaches to understanding knowledge. How I am hearing and sharing stories as I consider research conversations is important to me and respects the person I am trying to become. I consider the stories shared in the conversational relationship to be somewhat sacred, respecting the journey that both the researcher and participant find themselves in (Bateson, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Some Elders say that stories have the ability to heal and that it is important to become a good listener to recognize the teachings from the stories. I feel that the approach towards knowledge, and how I accept it and listen to it, impacts the type of teachings that can be gained. Narrative inquiry works in a similar way because it encourages the telling and retelling of stories, and through this process it honours shared experiences through relationships and offers the ability to grow through the stories.

I continue to learn from my students and the families I have worked with as a community worker and teacher. Many of the families taught me to go “sideways” when asking questions. What this means is that I should not ask the questions directly; I need to take time, be patient and have discussions, recognizing that the answers to the questions will eventually emerge. Conversations cannot be rushed. It is impossible to consider the sharing of stories if I do not understand the environment and its ability to create or limit conversation.

From people in my community and my students’ families, I have learned that answers sometimes take time to find themselves, and that there are often reasons that

some questions are not answered. Narrative inquiry reminds me of the past teachings and the importance of process, relationships, time, and place.

Listening Sideways Through Teachings

I was invited to sit down with an Elder to ask about the experience of school from his perspective. I was asked to talk to him about where school is heading for aboriginal people in the future. I was asked to get his advice and to hear his story.

I remember sitting down to start the conversation with Elder Andy, but he quickly changed the direction of the conversation. He asked me about my community and why I didn't speak my language. I remember telling him that I was adopted when I was 2 from the foster home, and that my community was Montreal Lake Cree Nation. He asked me why I was adopted, and I responded by telling him that my family had social issues that made it difficult for me to stay and that my grandparents were too old to take me in.

Andy moved me in a different conversational direction now by telling me some of his story. He was from Whitecap Dakota First Nation, and he told me he could walk through the community and show me the unmarked graves of his Dakota people that go back right to the beginning when they came originally from the United States. He then shared that it is important to know about the past but that I needed to move on and to continue to look forward. He then asked me my family name. I told him it was Settee-Kingfisher. With a straight face he responded, "I know your dad Harvey Sr. I have many memories of him." He remembered him from residential school at St. Michael's in Duck Lake.

The conversation with this Elder was intense and straightforward. I asked him what my dad was like, and he said that he liked hockey and played left wing. He told me about a goal he scored against Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and about a time when they met a famous professional hockey player. The details in Elder Andy's words created a beautiful image in my mind, and the event seemed to have happened yesterday. I found the story so unbelievable because I also played hockey and I was a left winger. I also played against Muskeg Lake, although I scored no goals. The story to me was powerful, being the first story I had ever heard about my biological father, a man whose name I share.

My conversation with Elder Andy also was significant and unexpected, as I thought I was going to listen to an Elder talk about the history of education. He did talk about it, but he managed to do it in a different way, in his own way. He used the conversation to teach, approaching a difficult subject through the power of story. His advice "to move on" is strong, candid, but also difficult. My identity weaves through this conversation, because deep inside I always knew I was different and that something inside me desired the knowledge of roots and a home place.

I feel even though I am not in my community, a piece of me exists there. I know I am in postsecondary education to better myself and my communities. It often feels like it's a group success. Despite the past, we are all still connected, cheering each other on. I had not known that my father played hockey. I think this is significant in my life because it is a meaningful experience from my youth. Perhaps the conversation with Elder Andy was meant to happen all along. I have never been able to ask questions about my

biological father because there are certain things I don't ask. From what I understand and what I am sometimes told is that past stories and answers will eventually come out when the time is right, most often indirectly, sideways.

The conversations I shared with youths reminded me that I needed to move in the right direction, respecting time, place, and the personal and social. Without respect for the process the information shared will not come from the right place; it will be what I want to hear, and the conversational relationship will be difficult to maintain. Narrative inquiry helps me respect the individual within the research and attends to the details of a life because it provides space for the experience and honours the inquiry process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as "becoming visible from our own lived and told stories. Sometimes, this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret, stories come to light as much as do those of our participants" (p. 62). The gift of sharing and hearing stories has the ability to open conversational doors and move sideways by creating an opportunity for respectful shared experiences; Elder Andy would call this a teaching.

Learning About Listening

The idea of listening or looking sideways comes out of the conversations that I have engaged in with the youths. I found that many stories exist when I try to see beyond what I initially hear. In order to do this I must attend to the space and continue to get better at listening sideways. Stories may hold great meaning, but the ability to learn to hear beyond the story is also important. The listener must pay attention to the silences

and gaps in conversation or uncover the lessons through the stories, which may look different for each person who hears the stories.

Bateson, in *Peripheral Visions* (1994), provided a metaphor to help me think about this. “Concentration is too precious to belittle. I know that if I look very narrowly and hard at anything I am likely to see something new—like the life between the grass stems that only becomes visible after moments of staring. Softening that concentration is also important—I’ve heard that the best way to catch the movement of falling stars is at the edge of vision” (pp. 103–104). I am continuing to listen and to learn from the youths and I am learning that many of the stories rest in the spaces that which I fail to attend.

I am learning to listen to silence between words and the silences in spaces when conversation has gone to a deeper place than I imagined. I am learning to listen sideways by sitting with the Elders in ceremony and watching in silence and learning from the actions that are taking place all around me. I am trying to learn to look past the initial story and hear what lies behind the story. I share the stories of my life as a young person and, as time has progressed, as a teacher and now a father. My lived experiences, and the way I am coming to know them, make it difficult for me to sometimes hear the stories.

I think listening and hearing in a sideways manner means to pay attention, reflect deeply, as I try to understand the path that we are co-creating. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) see the narrative inquiry process as “a kind of inquiry that necessitates ongoing reflection, what we have called wakefulness” (p. 184). I think sometimes I need to stop and listen, turn inwards, and pay attention to the silent spaces that exist in stories. The

silence and gaps teach me in an indirect manner and help me to inquire more deeply into the stories I am living and telling.

Coming Into Relation

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) helped me to further understand narrative inquiry: “Narrative inquiry is one of trying to make sense of life as lived . . . it is trying to figure out the taken for grantedness . . . it is working towards intimacy of relationship” (p. 78). As I think about my own stories of learning to be a narrative inquirer I see a resonance with the stories of many of the youths with whom I spoke. My desire to learn from other researchers and to learn the language and culture of the academic world parallels the experiences of many of the students I have worked with in the past, many of whom did not experience success in school and left before their graduation. As it is in many school stories, I, too, have felt lost and disconnected in this new university environment, searching on a new path for a level of comfort or a rhythm that realizes the possibilities in my life.

The opportunity to sit down in relation and communicate about difficult circumstances in life cannot be underestimated; the healing powers in conversation cannot be quantified. As I moved forward in relation with the youths with whom I worked, I know the conversations and mutual feelings will not be soon dismissed. Lopez (1990) helps me to understand this more clearly: “Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other’s memory. This is how people care for themselves” (p. 60).

I am hoping that as the youths continue on their life journeys they will recall the connection and use the power of words to sustain them. I am hopeful that the shared experience will impact them in the same way it has helped me in moving forward on my journey. Quite simply, narrative inquiry gave me a chance to listen differently and shifted who I was as a researcher to a place of collaboration where I was much more comfortable within myself.

Going to Place: Beginning to Live Alongside

In the study, I had the opportunity to have conversations with three youths I had previously known at different points in my life. I thought very carefully of the youths with whom I would be having conversations about leaving school. I sat with Jules, Leanne, and Skye over the course of 6 months, their diverse life and school experiences helping me reflect on the research puzzle. Their stories and our conversations were an awakening for me due to the detailed expressions and the regrets that I often felt having not asked about their individual stories. Reflecting on my conversations with them, I wondered if I could have been a better teacher had I heard the stories they kept silent. I still read the stories and find myself asking many questions about the place and the limited knowledge I had about their lives when I walked with them in the hallways on the school landscape.

Leanne. I immediately pictured Leanne when I tried to think of students who left school that I could approach for the study. I was a teacher when she attended the local

high school, and I knew her family through her older sister whom I had previously taught. I had great ambivalence when I thought of talking with her about her high school experience and her story of leaving school. I knew she was in a difficult relationship and that her family was troubled by the story of her leaving school before graduation. I did not think she would agree to conversations about school; they were places of vulnerability. Nevertheless, I went to the local mall and passed a message to some former students that I wanted to reach her. They carried my message and she phoned days later.

I was excited when Leanne called me but also nervous because I did not know how to ask her in the most respectful way to talk about her story of leaving school. I looked at her as the student athlete, the popular girl in high school who would probably not have time to spend with me talking about the past. I was overwhelmingly nervous when we met at a coffee shop in the mall and started a conversation about life. To my surprise, she had no problem sharing her story and was very excited to meet. I thought perhaps she would be embarrassed to sit with me in such a public setting where she had many friends and contacts.

I was very humbled both in the moment and in the many subsequent hours of conversation that we shared. I learned many details of her life and school experience that I could not have possibly considered as a teacher. She opened up to me and told me about the past. I respectfully listened to her story. We always met at the same coffee shop, and I was aware of the way things might look for her. As a former student, Leanne needed a great deal of strength to be able to talk to a teacher in a public place. Our conversational relationship might be best described through actions. After our initial meeting we walked

in opposite directions, but after our final meeting we walked through the mall and had supper together to discuss the research text. Our story had changed, and the relationship had shifted through the sharing process.

I recall the first meeting and the details of conversation. I put the tape recorder away and let her talk; the stories of school always emerged. Our conversations often exceeded 1 hour and one lasted 3 hours. I sat down with her at various points in the research project, and I was proud to share with her the story we co-created. I met her five different times to discuss the stories of her life and school story. She developed a scrapbook for me of her school story and with it a journal of how she viewed her experiences. I look at the past differently now because of the sharing process, and I believe, through the conversation, we provided an opportunity to create some new forward-looking stories. I understand her more clearly and look beyond her basketball life. I appreciated her optimistic view of the future when we would meet over a large black coffee: "Always black, no sugar, Lessard."

Skye. I was very interested in learning more about Skye's school and life story. I had, at one time, been very connected with Skye and her family, but time and distance had created a disconnection. I looked forward to asking her to join me to talk about her school experience. I knew how to reach her family and I knew that I had to contact her mom and dad before I could start the process of conversation. I recognized, through my previous relationship with her family, that I needed to pay attention to the details of culture and the specific spiritual beliefs that were central in their family life. I started the

conversation about school with protocol, that being tobacco. Through this they invited me to meet them at a bus stop to see their daughter before she left to go back to her new city.

I knew Skye well in my capacity as a teacher and coach and we had a strong connection. I looked at her differently than I did other students because I played hockey for her family team on the reserve. I often saw her outside of school in different places. I felt very sad the day she left school. I can still see her leaving in my mind. I continued to have a good relationship with her family and felt our connection would exceed school. During the research, I met Skye in many different physical places, and as I look at it now I see an interesting pattern. Although I felt like I knew her best in comparison to the other participants, I found it very difficult to talk with her about her school and life stories. She felt at times embarrassed to share with me, or she would say, “Lessard, come on, man, you already know this; you know me.” Our previous relationship would sometimes make the conversation difficult.

I knew personally the way her parents wanted the conversation to take place. They invited me to a round dance honouring their family member, and through the experience I began to understand and hear and see the story so differently. Each time I met Skye we didn’t just talk; we were constantly moving, by eating in a busy food court with her two sisters or golfing together in a place comfortable to her. By taking the forced conversation out of focus, many stories began to emerge. I learned from Skye by listening sideways to her stories. I formed a more solid connection with the entire family through the process of sharing. We looked at the past together and formed a relationship that was held together by trust. I carefully attended to the details of this conversational relationship

and understood the fear that the family might share, thinking that the stories might represent a bad story, another aboriginal story. I remember as I write this the words of her father after I read my narrative account. He said to me, “So this won’t be a bad story of us,” and through this question the family continued to teach me about the importance of taking care of a story.

Jules. I met Jules as a youth worker many years ago when I first arrived in the city. I worked closely with her and many of her friends in a local school. Our routine back then always started off with homework and then would quickly move to sports and activities. We called this place and time period in our lives “Mustang Pride.” I look back often at these years in my life, reflecting on where I have been, where I am now, and where I am headed.

I reached out to Jules because I knew she would help me to understand a little differently. I had a unique perspective in that I watched her transition through the stages of school from junior to senior high. I listened to her carefully as she quietly explained her story. We sat on a bench in a busy mall on three occasions. I explained why I had a tape recorder, and through our conversations I began to hear a story that troubled me, one that I could not attend to as a youth worker connected to a system that can create disharmony in families. I carefully listened to her words as Jules took time at her lunch breaks to share a small piece of her story.

As I reflect on the stories of life and school, there is so much more I wish I could have asked. Jules taught me about life and how it might look for a family that comes from

a different country and tries to negotiate an unfamiliar landscape. Jules helped me to see beyond the initial story, as I recall feeling shocked that I had not known what she was living through and causing challenges for her in school. I found out by listening to Jules, that when life is difficult, the stories of school become less important than the details of a life. I found out by listening that the details of a life are difficult to hear when all one can see is the school story.

Field Text to Research Text

On my research journey, I travelled throughout the city to get to a place where I could begin discussions about school and life with my participants. I took notes in a journal and used a tape recorder when it was appropriate. I was aware how the tape recorder this might impact the conversational relationship with my participants as I tried to hear their experiences. Many times I put the tape recorder away so the conversation would not be inhibited. I would take out my notepad and begin to scrawl notes, asking participants to carefully explain what they were saying and how I was interpreting it so I could write it down in detail. When I arrived home, I would bring out the tape recorder and record what I had heard, reflecting on the experience as I moved forward in the relationship.

Being in the field and my approach to hearing the stories of the youths was very much dependent on the relationship and the conversational space. I could feel how the space was shaped by my previous relationship with the youths. I understood when they were tired or if there were other thoughts on their minds. I tried to adjust accordingly and

respect the space and the life stories they were living out which centered on responsibilities. The conversational relationship with all three youths moved deeper and shifted from past stories to stories of the present and future. The conversations and sharing of stories allowed me to think deeply about my own stories of teaching. I wondered if I had shifted their stories of school whether I would have understood them more clearly. I wondered how their stories were going to shape my practice when I returned to the classroom. The stories shared have had a profound effect on the person I am becoming. I have tried to honour the participants' stories and think of them often in my current writing and teaching. The research has shifted me and changed me in many ways, many of which I am just starting to understand. I am hoping that I can take care of their stories and tell them in a respectful way that honours this special period in my life.

The task of interpreting the text and moving from field text to research text was a difficult transition. I had many questions based on my previous relationships and the places where I had come to know each specific youth. I wondered, as I wrote, how Leanne would see my words, if she would feel regret in telling me her story. I knew her as a student and wondered about the reaction to her sharing a story that heavily influenced her family and the family story of graduating from school. I wondered if it would impact my relationship with the family outside the research. I wondered about the proximity to my previous job at the high school and how I would be perceived if I spoke out against that school place in my writing. I wondered about voice and my job as a teacher; how would she hear my story and how would voice influence the way the story is told. Would she see me as an authority figure and perhaps struggle in the sharing of her

story. I wrote reflectively and in the first person in all three narrative accounts. I tried to position myself in a place that kept me in the story, and I honoured our past relationships.

I looked at all three stories as lessons in learning to see people in more than one way, and the importance of listening to youths and not labeling students as athlete, academic, or popular. I wanted to position myself as a teacher in all three stories because I wanted to pass on the stories to teachers in the future. I wanted the stories of youths to speak to those who teach in classroom places. I think of the stories as opportunities to co-create forward-looking stories for other youths, families, and teachers in the future.

As an aboriginal person and teacher, I was very aware of the importance of voice and the passing on of stories. I did not want Skye's story to be viewed as another aboriginal story, or a prescribed approach to working with aboriginal youths. I wrote the stories with spirituality in mind and reflecting on the importance of taking care of a story. I asked the family and an Elder from the community on what I could and could not share regarding the writing of experiences at a round dance. I attended to the details of Skye's stories differently based on my relationship with her family. I looked at her stories as opportunities to teach cultural lessons. I wanted people who might read about her to form a mental picture of other aboriginal youths they might come to know in the future. I wanted the reader to see Skye through the words, so I tried to pay attention to the importance of voice when I wrote the text. I am hoping they can see her through the words.

Each youth had a specific and unique story, and I tried to attend to this and tried to respect temporality and place in all the stories. I was in different parts of my life when

I worked with each specific youth. The stories of Jules brought me back to my first experiences in working with youths in the city where I had come to know her. Her story and my memories of it brought me back to a good place. I remembered her as a little girl and I wrote her story with this on my mind. I wrote about her “candle light” story and how she would get herself to school by herself as an elementary student. I wrote the story to honour her spirit but also to trouble the notion that sometimes we don’t hear the stories clearly or honour the individual and the life that person is living. Her story involved getting in trouble for not being on time, despite the fact she was taking care of herself as a Grade 5 student. I wrote the research text with place on my mind because the geography in her school story has shaped much of my current teaching identity. The transition from the field text to research text was problematic for me at times. I felt so close to the work, and my position would sometimes lead me to question how I would write the stories. When I reread what I wrote and the stories shared, I feel I did my best to honour the individual and each story of life and school.

Ethical Dilemmas

As I look back on the work I have done in the past year, I think about how the work will physically look once it is put together in a more permanent fixture. I think of the library or the places that my work might be viewed. I think of all the possible places where the stories might be shared and the most important place for me is back home at my reserve and with the individual youths and their families that helped me to understand the stories. I think of ethics and how some might read my words and question the way I

approached hearing the stories and coming to know. I tried to approach the youths as individuals and create a space that would honour their story and their telling of it. In the process of coming into relation there were certain protocols I knew that had to be followed.

In Skye's family, the importance of getting to know the whole family and honouring the cultural and spiritual story that existed was central. The conversations with her family were part of the evolving story and the way in which they felt comfortable sharing her story. Skye's family looked at the story and my role within it as a chance to teach me, to help me understand another way of living; they were "teaching sideways" through observation, dancing, prayer, and celebration. I needed to inquire into my own stories of identity and culture to help me understand Skye's story at a deeper level. I needed to attend to the details of place when considering her story and the specific details that shape her story such as language and culture and how it can collide with the urban setting, specifically school. I must think deeply about the lessons learned and how I am going to share them in the future. I am thinking about how a story can be told in many ways and the importance of telling an aboriginal school story in a respectful way. I think about the multiplicity in stories and how there is no one aboriginal story and that Skye's story is unique and must be storied this way. I am thinking about how those in school might have storied her without providing her an opportunity for voice. I am thinking more deeply about the conversational space in schools and the importance of identity on the high school landscape. I am thinking this way because I can see her story in my mind and I would like others to think about it also.

Skye's story and how I approached the research process bumps up against the ethical notion of not involving families or offering gifts, which can be considered unethical. However, I knew from the way I had been taught in my community that I needed to follow protocol with tobacco, a blanket for the Elders, and tea with the family to be able to start to have conversations with a member of this particular aboriginal community. I knew in my heart what was important and respectful and that the only way to share stories was to go to this place physically and spiritually. I recognized the importance of listening to the stories carefully and that when I tell a story of her family it is important to note names specifically because it honoured the person and the connection to place, which if passed on to me verbally, are important to recognize in my writing. The name Joseph Paul must stay in the writing because it honours the family it is a family story, not an individual story. I cannot separate the life from the school or the individual from the collective in this case. I went back to the family and shared the story, and they asked that their real names be included because it was a good story for their family, a reminder of the past. It was not a "bad story" of their family, and they were honoured the words remind them of the memory of the night that we shared honouring their family member. I only wish that my words could more clearly capture the spirit of the evening, I can still see it clearly in my mind.

I intend to have my work bound in a hardcover book, take multiple copies with me to sit with an Elder I know, and have them blessed with sweetgrass. I will take the words and the stories within and present them as gifts to all the people who have helped me on this journey. In each book I will leave sweetgrass, because I know from my

teachings that this is the right way to do things. This is the way I want to pass on the stories to the next person, in a respectful manner.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

My review of the existing literature draws on an in-depth review that was previously conducted for the Early School Leavers' Project (Caine & Krawchuk, 2007). The phenomenon of *early school leaving* is wondered about globally. The desire to learn about youths' experiences of leaving school early dates back to the early 1900s when the term "drop-out" first appeared in articles attempting to define or categorize the issue (Hospital for Sick Children, 2005). *The term *early school leaver* does not have a universal definition but is described in the research as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma (Hospital for Sick Children, 2005).

Various forms of measurement, fluctuating results, and the complexity within definitions of early school leavers adds to a growing body of research that tries to capture the diversity of the phenomenon. Common assumptions in the research (Alberta Learning, 2001; Bowlby & McMullen 2002; HRDC 2000; Mendleson, 2006) is that leaving school early is not desirable (HRDC 2000) and that it can impact future development and opportunities; however the assumptions are formulated from a vantage point that may not represent the youths' accounts of leaving school. The literature often frames early school leaving as an issue that has societal repercussions (Canadian Council on Learning, 2005) such as lower literacy levels (Finnie & Meng, 2006; OECD 1998), which in turn may lead to a lower skill level (HRDC 2000), impacting the integration into the larger collective society (Bowlby & McMullen, 2005) with employment issues

(Bushnik, Barr-Telford, & Dussiere 2004), perhaps leading to alcohol, drug, and crime issues (HRDC 2000). Overall, the cost of leaving school has been noted in many research articles and studies conducted on the issue. Chuang (1997) calls the number of high school drop-outs the most pressing social problem plaguing the United States of America. Levin (2005) has calculated a societal cost index related to the number of youth who leave school, breaking down the individual cost areas including health, welfare, taxation, policing, and labour. The numbers and statistics highlight that early school leaving is broad in scope however, what becomes apparent in the review of the literature is that the voices of youth who leave school early is in large part absent. Without hearing the youths' accounts and acknowledging their perspectives in the studies of early school leaving it is difficult to deepen our knowledge and understand the complex phenomenon of early school leaving.

Definitions of Terms

Numerous terms were used in the initial search and literature review findings to describe youth who had left school prior to graduation. Terms such as *school leaver*, *drop-out*, or *push out* were common labels used to describe youth involved in the process of leaving school but little or no definition is provided to clarify the terminology (Caine & Krawchuk, 2007).

The literature review highlights the 1950s and 1960s as focal points in the construction of the phenomena. It is suggested that before this time period, social forces created the need for many students to leave school early to enter the workforce and

contribute to the family's economic needs. In the 1960s the term drop-out began to appear in the research literature suggesting a negative or deviant decision made by youth and closely aligning them with the label of delinquent (Hospital for Sick Children, 2005). It is emphasized in the review (Caine & Krawchuk, 2007) that the response to youth who left school early, prior to the 1960s, upon return to school was largely positive and welcoming; students were encouraged to re-enter into classrooms and continue their school experience. During this time period the term *early school leaver* appeared and continues to remain popular as a descriptive term. Definitions of early school leavers are closely tied to social constructs and the environmental forces that impact the research literature.

In the 1980s the landscape continued to shift and early school leavers were described through a process of disengagement from the school. This philosophical shift in thinking emphasized the relationships between student and school. Disengagement shows that there is an existing living culture in schools which can be shaped and, conversely, can negatively impact the youth's school experiences. The disengagement process is seen as a non-linear process with a transition to adulthood. Schools may not necessarily be viewed as places where one is engaged in learning; disengagement sees early school leaving as a complex and emotional process (Hospital for Sick Children, 2005).

During the same time period, researchers in the United States began to use the terms *push out* and *pull out* to describe the experiences of early school leavers. Research (Hospital for Sick Children, 2005) began to address the role of schools in the process of early school leaving. Factors such as low academic performance, behavioral difficulties,

and suspensions provide pressure from the organization to move students out of school; in a sense pushing them out or creating barriers for students to enter and remain in school.

The *pull out* factors considered in an analysis include the benefits and risks of leaving school. Early school leavers who choose to *pull out* of formal schooling do so because their need to maintain studies has dissipated and is less critical than other factors in their life at that time. The pressures of the economy, family crisis, parenthood, relationships, and feelings of disconnection are some examples of the experiences that pull youth out of school. On the other hand Dekkers and Claassen (2001) emphasize that many school leavers leave school due to push out factors (age, school, policies), not pull out factors (economy, family). Throughout the literature, review other terms such as *opting out*, *facilitated out*, and *exclusion* were also introduced to describe the process of students leaving school early. Each definition looks at school experience through a different lens including a community, social justice, or cultural lens. Qualitative researchers frequently use the term *early school leaver* while quantitative perspectives rely on the term *drop-out* to present findings. The challenges in locating a definition to describe the experiences of youth who leave school early are evident throughout time.

Statistical Overview

While the overall drop-out rate is decreasing in Canada, some groups continue to represent a disproportionately higher number of students who leave school early.

Examples of groups with disproportionate representation for high school drop-outs

include rural students (Bowlby, 2005), male students (Bowlby & McMullen 2002), Aboriginal students (Mendelson, 2006), students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Mendelson, 2006), and English as a Second Language students (Watt & Roessingh, 2001).

Alberta

Alberta has one of the highest drop-out rates in Canada. In Alberta, approximately one in four students who start high school do not graduate (Alberta Learning, 2001). The Alberta Government Education website reports that the high school completion rate was 77.4% in 2004/2005; this completion rate increased from 73.9% in 2001/2002. Completion was defined as not obtaining a high school diploma within 5 years of entering Grade 10. Despite an increasing rate of high school completion, many students are leaving school before graduation and where they are located in terms of statistical profiles and the categories assigned to them provokes questions. Some studies (HRDC, 2000; Looker & Thiessen, 2008) identified regional differences and cited a strong economy as a possible indicator of leaving school early.

Differential Rates of Leaving

1. Aboriginal Students

Looking specifically at the Aboriginal population it is evident that small gains in overall high school completion have been made, but the number of Aboriginal youth who leave school early still remains far behind the statistical averages in Canada. Alberta

Learning (2001) reported that in 1996, 45% of Canadian Aboriginal people between the ages of 20-29 had not completed high school. Further studies (CCLearning 2005; Gingras, Bowlby, & Pilon 2001; HRDC 2000; Mendelson, 2006; Richards 2009) showed that there was a higher number of Aboriginal students (15 years and older) who did not complete high school in comparison to the Canadian population as a whole (54% to 35%). The overall rate of urban Aboriginal youth not completing high school in comparison to non-Aboriginal youth in the same settings remains disproportionately high (Bowlby, 2005). A study by the C. D. Howe Institute (2008) showed that only 32% of on-reserve students completed high school compared to 64% of Aboriginal students who attended off-reserve school settings. The statistics clearly show a group that is disengaged from schools. It is important to note the distinct history and difficulty in defining who and what counts as an Aboriginal student is not considered in the statistical data.

2. English as a Second Language

The ESL population in Alberta schools has tripled from 14,673 in 1988–89 to 43,346 in the 2007–08 school year. Watt and Roessingh (1994, 2001) conducted research in a large Alberta school over a 10-year period and found that the drop-out rate for ESL students remained unchanged over this time period, at 74%. Derwing, Decorby, Ichikawa, and Jamieson (1999) reported similar trends; 46% of high school ESL learners did not complete their studies within the K-12 system compared to the 70% completion rate for their peers in Alberta schools. It is reported that as many as 93% of all English language learners who arrived in Canada ranked beginners in English, are likely to drop

out of high school. Researchers and school administration often fail to account for the individual diversity within the categorization of ESL students. The individual accounts remain far removed from the studies that highlight the statistical differences in school leaving. The unique social, cultural, historic, and spiritual backgrounds must be considered in the ESL population.

3. *Gender*

Numerous studies on early school leavers (Canadian Council for Learning, 2005; HRDC 2000) identify males as more likely to drop-out of high school than females. In 1990–1991, 19% of males between the ages of 20 and 24 had not completed high school compared to 14% of women of the same age. The statistics also highlight over-representation over time. In 1990–91, a sizable majority of dropouts were male (58%) but, by 2004–2005 that proportion had increased to 64%. One of the factors often cited is male disengagement from school due to work (40%) while females are more likely to drop out due to family responsibilities. Parent (1999) identifies economic considerations as weighing heavily on the decision for males to leave school early. Beaudry, Lemieux, and Parent (1999) explored the phenomenon of males leaving school at a higher rate and named this the *discouraged worker effect* where young males between the ages of 15 and 19 years old disengage from school much like a discouraged worker and then join the labour force. The trends regarding gender are consistently cited in the numerous articles on early school leaving.

4. Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status continues to be a factor in the high numbers of youth who leave school before graduation. Socio-economic status has no barriers and impacts youth regardless of gender or language. Studies show (Canadian Council of Learning, 2005; HRDC, 2000) that certain variables of socio-economic status and background relating to family and peer structure, education, occupation, and attitudes are associated with early school leaving. According to HRDC (2000) 4 in 10 students who left school before graduation lived with one or no parents. The family support system is significant on both an economical and emotional level for youth. The above-mentioned study also highlighted that 45% of youth who leave school early come from families where parental education levels are significantly lower than peers of the same age group. The consequences of lower educational attainment in families may lead to lower paying jobs or the necessity to work multiple jobs. In turn, parental attitude towards school can be impacted by a family's educational attainment level (Rumberger, 2001). Socioeconomic factors according to Bowlby and McMullen (2002) can negatively impact rural students in comparison to urban students, ESL students, and Aboriginal students. It is evident that socioeconomic factors have the ability to create significant barriers to high school completion. The issue of socio economic status and related variables adds to the complexity of youth who leave school before graduation.

Conceptual Frameworks

1. The Individual Deficit Model (risk factors)

The Individual Deficit Model is an often-cited prevention strategy (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985) that appeared in the literature in the 1980s and attempts to assign meaning to human behaviour through the categorization of risk factors. The model focuses on the specific role of students and families in early school leaving and identifies influences that put students at risk. The Individual Deficit Model looks at youth and families as homogenous groups and assigns responsibility for school experiences. There is an extensive risk factor list with many variations appearing in the literature on youth deemed at-risk. From the list it appears that students who drop out are likely to be unmotivated by class work, come from marginalized communities, have family problems; or experience drug and alcohol problems (Lee & Ip, 2003).

The risk factors that are often cited in the literature include categories or domains: 1) demographic characteristics and family background, 2) past school performance, 3) personal/psychological characteristics, 4) adult responsibilities, 5) school or neighbourhood characteristics. The classification system can be helpful to researchers and administrators to create a profile or identify difficult transitions in the school lives of students. For example in the school domain low academic achievement and failure would be considered risk factors for youth and a possible predictor for future school leaving. The most extensive domain is the personal or psychological domain which indicates numerous characteristics in youth who may be at-risk for school leaving.

Some common characteristics of early school leavers are highlighted by Bowlby and McMullen (2002). They identified that early school leavers were more likely to have parents who had not completed high school in comparison to those students who graduated (26.9% to 8.9%). It was also discovered that drop-outs were more likely to have lower grade averages than those students who graduated, and the repetition of grades led to a higher incidence of early school leaving. Early school leavers are also five times more likely to have repeated a grade. Further intervention studies have been conducted around the issue of grade retention and high school drop-outs and the findings indicate that this can be a positive predictor of risk (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Bowlby and McMullen (2002) found that holding a part-time job was linked to dropping out of high school. Youth who worked at a job more than 30 hours a week represented a higher proportion of drop-outs.

The notion of risk factors may be a helpful tool to initiate intervention strategies for youth who are at-risk to leave school early. However, one critique (Gleason & Dynarski, 1998) of risk factors is the over simplification of characteristics in the personal profile which may lead to ineffective strategies implemented for students who were not at-risk, thereby missing other students who are also likely to leave school. Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (2000) developed a list of categories based on their research on the individual school experiences of youth who leave school. Categories developed include: the quiet drop-outs, the disengaged drop -outs, low achiever drop-outs, and the maladjusted drop-outs. The naming and categorization of the phenomenon is no doubt beneficial to researchers and educators attempting to frame behaviors

however, the individual and complexities within the phenomenon may be difficult to ascertain.

Protective Factors

In response to the deficit model (risk factors) a relatively new body of work has emerged that shifted the focus from youth and looks at what can be done in a proactive manner to promote healthy development in youth. Garmezy and Rutter (1985) described protective factors as a shift from a deficit model to a competency model of child development. The model looks at developing resiliency in youth. The research cites three key protective factors (Bernard, 1991) to alleviate risk; specifically in school including caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation.(see attached chart)

Protective Factor	Condition
<i>Caring and support</i>	<i>Nurturing Staff and Positive Role Models</i>
	<i>Creative, Supportive School Leadership</i>
	<i>Peer Support, Cooperation, and Mentoring</i>
	<i>Personal Attention and Interest from Teachers</i>
	<i>Warm, Responsive School Climate</i>
<i>High Expectations</i>	<i>Minimum Mastery of Basic Skills</i>
	<i>Emphasis on Higher Order Academics</i>
	<i>Avoidance of Negative Labeling and Tracking</i>

Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

Leadership and Decision Making by Students

*Student Participation in Extracurricular
Activities*

*Parent and Community Participation in
Instruction*

Culturally Diverse Curricula and Experiences

Protective factors and models of resiliency are increasingly prevalent in the literature. The models of resilience have shifted to assessment and standardized methods of identification. The Teacher Child Rating Scale (Hightower et al., 1985; T-CRS 1986) and the Revised Class Play (Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985; RCP 1985) are two examples of standardized assessment tools that aim to identify characteristics of resilience. A further example in school systems throughout North America and specifically Alberta is an educational program called Jeanne Gibbs' Tribes: A New Way of Learning Together. The Tribes educational program is based on the premise of protective factors, specifically Caring and Support, High Expectations, and Meaningful Participation. The goal of the program is to create a supportive environment that builds resilience in youth. The Tribes Program is currently being implemented in classrooms to foster an environment where youth can share their voice and attempt to challenge the social and environmental barriers to healthy development.

Individual Risk and Protective Factors

The research on risk and protective factors continues to be important to school administrators and teachers as they attempt to identify programming that meets the needs of youth deemed at-risk. Risk factors look at the predictors while protective factors shift towards the developmental processes that may foster resilience in youth. Rutter (1979) identifies the importance of schools and the role they play in the development of youth and their ability to stay connected to their schooling experience. In the book *Fifteen Thousand Hours* Rutter writes about the developmental process and the amount of hours children attend school over the span of a dozen years. He calls these years “formative” and the fifteen thousand hours in school significant to the emotional and cognitive development of children. He emphasized the importance of administration and the organization, or school culture (Rutter, 1979). He noted values, attitudes, and behavior of schools positively shaped outcomes, regardless of the characteristics of youth or physical location of the school.

1. Process Theories of Disengagement

In the 1980s Finn explored research on youth who dropped out of school, questioning the previous focus on student characteristics and the notion of the experience of dropping out occurring at one specific moment in time, usually later in the youth’s schooling career. Finn largely concentrated his research on the developmental process of youth and provoked questions surrounding the available intervention programs for youth at-risk of leaving school. Finn (1989) explains, “a

youngster's leaving school before graduation may be just one more event, albeit a conspicuous event, in a chain that may have begun years before" (p. 118).

Rumberger (1987) suggests "dropping out itself might better be viewed as a process of disengagement from school, perhaps for either social or academic reasons (p. 111).

The realization and acceptance that students are aware of the process of early school leaving is becoming more prevalent in the literature. The numerous process theories of disengagement show that the experiences of early school leavers are complex, fragmented, and filled with tensions (Hospital for Sick Children, 2005). The process of "dropping out" is described as something that does not just happen; it is not an event but a gradual process over time. Bowlby and McMullen (2002) emphasize this point when they write about students who leave school, return to school, and then leave once again. Youths' reasons for leaving school are varied and may include school, home, work, and social factors which all play a role in the process of disengagement. The process is not one specific event; rather, it is an eventual moving towards engagement and re-engagement. The movement in the research is much like a continuous shifting between the characteristics of youth and the process and policy of the institution and environmental features that lead to youth leaving school.

Conclusion

Early school leavers have individual stories that are shaped by the complexities of life in and out of school; they are diverse and cannot be considered as a homogenous

group without analyzing the political and social structures that exist within the societies that educate them. Current studies on early school leavers create a growing body of conflicted research that makes assumptions, struggles with defined terminology, categorizes, analyzes and processes the experiences of youth who leave school early. Future research on early school leavers needs to further our understanding about the complexities of early school leaving.

Research papers and statistical measures lead to the development of programs that react to the outcomes and consequences of early school leavers. The reaction to early school leavers is presented through prevention and retention strategies but they fail to consult with the voice of students in schools and, more importantly, with those youth who have left school. The research needs to locate and listen to the voices of youth, parents, and educators through the telling and re-telling of school stories. Without consulting the source of information and asking questions that lead to honest conversations, schools will continue to make decisions about youths, missing an opportunity to walk alongside them in the telling and re-telling of their school and life experience.

Chapter 4

Introduction to Narratives

How are we going to get to know their stories...

I like to sit down and talk to an Elder I know. His name is Bob and I go to see him for many different reasons . . . at times I need to talk and find some balance in life . . . sometimes I need a little wisdom to sustain me . . . and then there are other times that I just like to be around him and take him for a tea or a good meal and visit . . .

Every time I visit Bob I come away with something different . . . some new teachings . . . some things to think about.

A conversation I recall and that stays with me is the time when we talked about “the process” and enjoying life, learning from it, and not thinking about the end result. As he spoke he looked at me and told me to not worry about the future as much, and that the longest journey that I am going to take is from my head to my heart.

As I think about this statement I think of the journey that I have been on in regards to the research project.

I think often these days, about where I am going and where I have been in relation to the youth I have had conversations with.

I am thinking of the conversations and my role as a teacher and graduate student.

I am wondering how these conversations have changed me.

I am wondering how these stories will shape my teaching as I move back into the classroom space.

This research journey has moved me in many directions and it has placed me in many physical locations. I have had conversations with the youth in bus stops, at the university, in different cities, on the basketball court, in the hallways of schools, at coffee shops, at restaurants, and my personal favourite—a perogie shop in the inner city. All these places and the in-between is where conversations with youth have taken place.

These are the places where we have shared details of life and recalled the stories of school.

There has been a wide variety of feelings as we share stories. I have seen sadness, anger, and humor as we have looked into the past together, reconnected in the present, and imagined the future.

The stories we shared are not about blame or pointing a finger at one another or the institutes that create the space where school happens.

The stories I have heard are about the youth and they help me to locate difficult paths that I may have a hard time seeing.

The youth are the experts. They have the stories and carry the wisdom within the stories. They have helped me as an educator to become a little more wakeful to what I cannot see.

I have many thoughts as I move along the research journey and prepare to re-enter the classroom space.

I find myself asking:

How will I come to hear the youth that are still in school?

How will I come to hear their life stories of which school is just a part?

How will I create spaces to hear their stories?

I wonder what messages and words our youth are taking with them when they enter the classroom space and when they leave it. What are they saying when they go home? What happens if they don't come back? What about the student that was there and now is not . . . is their story any less important?

The stories that the youth leave become just as important as the stories they arrive with. Many of the youth told me that they never had an opportunity to talk about school after they left. They didn't have a chance to work on an introduction . . . they didn't imagine a conclusion . . .

because leaving wasn't supposed to be a part of their story...

Chapter 5

Narratives

A Narrative Account of Skye – Sean Lessard

Prologue

Sometimes stories sit with me for a long time. I am not certain how to begin them. I don't always know the right way to share them or how to take care of them in an honourable way. I am learning. Hearing stories holds great responsibility and, as I write about the experiences of youth, I try to remember the voices of those who shared their stories with me. I am cautious when I write the stories of our Aboriginal youths. I am aware that stories can be read in more than one way. I try to think of a respectful way to write and share. I sit down often with the older ones in the community and the Elders and ask them to help me in this way. I often think of history and my own community and the stories that come from this place. I try to form an image in my mind as I write, thinking about how life might have been for our Elders and the sacrifices they made to help us on our current journeys. The stories of the past help me, as I try to write about our youth and the challenges they face in their school stories. I am writing these stories with many thoughts on my mind. I am writing this particular story to help me to begin to remember again.

For the past 7 years I have taught at a large urban high school in central Alberta. In my previous role as a teacher in this setting, I often worked with youth who had difficulty finding their way and maintaining their school story. Many of my students of the past came from an Aboriginal place; some of the students embraced this story, others

were in a state of development, and there were those who flatly rejected this script. I personally remember all those stories. I remember, as I write this, the difficulty in feeling comfortable and negotiating my feelings of uncertainty. I do remember denying who I was and trying to move away from knowing my cultural past and the roots that will always exist within. I remember the feelings that many of my students have and I write this story from a different lens and a stronger spirit than in times past.

I chose to write this particular story because it is what lies at the base of Skye's song, her story of school as I recall it. I wrote this specific story for Skye and her family and the wisdom that they continue to provide for me in the form of cultural teachings. As I share this story now, I ask those that choose to read it to think deeply with the heart and the mind, and imagine the beat of many drums playing in the background . . . as each of you begin to hear the sacred songs you will start to understand her story in a different way. I would like to call it a "dance me home song."

Bus Station Stories (First Meeting)

I was thinking about the many interesting people I had seen at the bus station as I waited for the arrival of a family that I had known in the past. I was wondering what our meeting was going to be like. It had been a long time since I last seen this family and I wondered how they had been keeping.

I looked around the bus station and saw many people pacing, sitting, and talking as they waited for their bus to arrive. Each person had a different story, a unique history. I wondered what their stories were and what brought them to the bus station on this day. I

sat in the bus station for over 3 hours waiting to connect with this family and to see their daughter, a student I once knew.

The nice thing about time is that it allows me to think and as I waited I conjured up memories from the past and jotted them down in my worn-out notebook. I wrote down many ideas about the times I had spent with this student and her family. I waited impatiently, fidgeting, hoping that they would come around the corner at any moment.

The family I knew, and was waiting for, adhered strongly to their cultural belief systems and relied on the Dakota traditions to keep them balanced in a challenging world. I met this family years ago. I was a teacher at the local high school. I was introduced to their daughter by a colleague. She thought that we would get along well because we both shared a common cultural heritage. I never did tell her that I was Cree and that this student I met was Nakota but that is another story for another day.

Sliding Backwards in Time . . .

As I sat in the bus station with my many thoughts, I remembered a particular day when I was introduced to a quiet young girl who excelled in sports and was from a nearby First Nation. The student I met had a unique and special name that stuck with me, it had meaning behind it. Her name was Skye. This young girl would barely look at me during our initial greeting; this was something which I had come to know and expect.

However, sitting in the bus station I recalled that when I began to share my story with her, the space shifted and she slowly began to tell me about herself. I started the conversation by asking about her community and where her family was from. I always

tried to help students to feel comfortable in that big school place. I wanted her and other students to know that they had a person that could assist them if needed. I often started conversations by asking about home and the community to find a common ground; to find a beginning. I recognized long ago that this school was a place where students could get easily lost. It was different.

Later in the week I had my next meeting with Skye but in a different place. I entered the gym to begin evaluations for the volleyball teams. I had, at one time in life, played college volleyball and assisted the school teams with their practices. On the far court I noticed Skye. I watched with interest, a quiet girl come to life on the volleyball court.

Skye was amazing to watch. As a player she was fast and fluid. She was more verbal than I had expected, often calling out plays and shouting out instructions. She was naturally talented and played at a very high level. I found it rewarding to watch her play this sport so freely. We had unexpectedly found another common thread. I was quietly proud of what I was seeing on this day. Skye was creating a different story for all of us.

I had the privilege to watch and informally coach this student athlete for the next 2 years. She came to me for help with training and skill development, always separate from her team. During these times we had many great conversations about life. She wanted to learn and always strived to become better. I appreciated these teaching moments.

Through time and the many games that were played I was eventually introduced to her family who never missed an opportunity to support their daughter. Her father,

Arnie, was small in stature but projected a feeling of strength and commitment to his cultural path. We had many good conversations. They started off small and formal and developed over time, much like any good friendship. I often talked to Skye's mother Daphne and she always greeted me with a hug and kindness. Skye's mother was a traditional woman, kind and dedicated to the values of her people. I enjoyed my conversations with Daphne and still see her gentle smile in my mind; it impressed on me the importance of family and happiness.

This is the family that I came to know during the school years and conversations that took place. I remembered that when I watched a game I always looked for them in the crowd. I often went and sat with them as they sat by themselves, alone and away from the rest of the parents; it is here where we visited. I have always loved sports and I could understand Skye's feeling for the game. It was her real reason for coming to school, not that much different than mine when I was young. Her family strongly supported all things that contribute to a healthy lifestyle.

An Invitation to Stand in a Different Relation

One of the memories I recalled as I jotted down thoughts in my notebook was being asked by Skye's father to represent the Nakota Nation in a hockey tournament. Her father had found out that I played in First Nation's tournaments competitively and they asked me to join them in a memorial tournament for a relative.

The invitation and the meaning behind the tournament still remains a highlight of my time with this family. I remember one afternoon hearing a knock on my classroom

door. I walked to the door and peered around the corner. There was Skye, her father, and her brother all waiting for me to reply to the invitation and asking me if I could leave school early to make the first game. I chuckled to myself and told them that it would not be that good of an idea for me to leave my class in the middle of the afternoon to play hockey. However, I would most definitely be at all the other games. These stories of family stayed with me long after they took place. The hockey game was just a game. The gesture to walk alongside this family and play in the memorial tournament for a relative and their First Nation meant a great deal to me.

Walking into their community dressing room immediately felt different than any time I had played with other teams. I met many family members from this Nation and before we started the game, the coach, Skye's father, prayed. I recall the prayer specifically because we did not ask to win. Instead we prayed to play safe and honourably and with respect for the other team and our own First Nations in all we do. I remember the prayer because it was in two languages and powerful in its message. These words stayed with me long past the event because we played for something different on this day. Stories of experience like this shifted my views and provided me an opportunity for learning by observing what was going on around me. This was a teaching.

The buses continued to arrive and depart. As I sat and waited in the bus station, many new faces appeared but I searched for just one as I scanned the crowd. To understand Skye, I need to understand her family. Skye is nested in the midst of family stories and family stories are cultural stories. Family is what Skye talked about often. It is what came first in her life. It was different than what I have ever experienced.

I had arranged that initial bus station meeting because I wanted to get her parents' thoughts on a project I was involved in at the university. I wanted to tell their daughter's story of school. I needed to see the family and ask permission to talk to their daughter about a subject that had been difficult for everyone. I wondered what their reaction might be to my request. I wondered if it was too sudden or if time had allowed healing for this story.

The Arrival . . .

I sat in the local bus station restaurant sipping on old coffee and anticipating that I could see this family at any moment. It was going to be great to reconnect for the first time in many years. I had waited far too long. I wondered what Skye even looked like now. Would I recognize her? I wondered how she was doing in life. What type of job did she have?

As hours passed, I began to realize that I might have missed Skye or perhaps I hadn't quite understood the departure times. Even though I felt like going home after waiting for so long I decided that I would sit and wait. There was one last bus that was leaving in an hour. There was a chance to still see them and I was determined to follow through and see this out.

As the clock crept closer to the last bus leaving for her destination, her family suddenly appeared at the sliding doors. The wait was worth it! I immediately packed up my belongings and made my way to the greet them. I was so happy to see them and we gave hugs all around, first to Arnie and then to Daphne. We laughed about our mix up in

times and we laughed harder when I told them how many cups of coffee I drank while I was waiting. After several minutes of laughter and reconnection Skye made her way through the sliding doors. It was great to see her on this day. I went up to her and gave her a big hug. I had so many questions but they would be for another time.

I recognized her but I also worried about her when I saw her. She had lost quite a bit of weight and looked somewhat tired. We both laughed when we greeted each other and, in our own way, we sent messages through our jokes. I told her mom and dad that she needed to eat more and that she needed bannock and soup to help her get strong. And in her response she told me that I needed to eat less bannock and soup because I had been getting too big. We laughed. This is the way it used to be and it was like old times in this moment.

We took a seat and talked, all of us together, sharing as much as we could in the limited time that we had. I told them about my work at the university and that I wanted to talk to Skye about her school story. She reassured me that it would be no problem and that she would be happy to participate. The only concern was that we didn't know when the next opportunity to talk would arrive. Skye's parents helped us with this next part. Arnie and Daphne proceeded to tell me that they were hosting a round dance in honor of Daphne's father. They explained that it was the fourth and final round dance for this important family member. I remember hearing them say, "Come out and visit. You will learn all the kid's stories. We invite you." With these simple but powerful words I knew what had to be done. I sat with Skye's parents as she boarded her bus, making her way

down the road to her new adult life. It was so good to see her family on this day. I am glad I waited. I wonder how the story would have changed if I had left.

Taking me Home—Helping me to Remember

A month later I found myself making preparations for the memorial round dance. I was still trying to find the perfect gift to bring to the ceremony. I looked at many places but always came back to a quilt that I spotted at the local mall. The quilt was crafted with fine details and it had a picture of a bear and a fish at the centre, creating a picture in my mind worthy of this special event. I looked at this quilt and thought this would be an appropriate gift to honour the Elders. It felt right. It had been many years since I had made my way to a round dance. I went through scenarios in my mind trying to recall the proper protocol and how the event takes place. I was ashamed that I could not recall all the details; how could I have forgotten?

As I drove out of the city, I was thinking about the event and the significance. I was trying to imagine what this day was all about. I knew the invitation was special as this was the fourth and final round dance to celebrate the life of Skye's grandfather, Paul. The round dance started at 4 p.m. and was to finish at 4 a.m. with specific events to commemorate the day. I knew I needed to be there on this Friday night. The family had invited me to walk with them in their world, to share their stories and become part of something bigger. I knew that, in their own way, this kind family was teaching me, showing me a different way in life—one that I was forgetting.

I arrived at the dimly lit community hall and many cars lined the parking lot. From the outside the building looked somewhat run down, in need of some paint and repair. I knew what people saw when they looked from the outside. But I had been in these spaces before and knew what to expect. As I walked through the doors I was greeted with the familiar welcoming scent of sweetgrass. It always leaves a gentle haze in the air and invites me to relax and open my mind to the sharing story that was taking place all around me.

I entered this place and listened for the sound of the drum. I looked at the centre of the hall and watched the stickman pass the drum sticks to a lead drummer. The drummer started with his family song, with many other men, young and old, joining around the table to celebrate through the beats and voices of communities tied. I was beginning to remember. I continued to make my way to the middle of the hall where the drummers played. I watched as 15 to 20 drummers played a song together and sang in unison. People gathered around the drummers and held hands and started to move to the music, shuffling to the beat of the drum, in a circle, always a circle. I was here at a different place—a good place.

Many feelings came back to me as I heard that initial song played; the drums and voices are still on my mind. Seeing our people dance together makes me proud. The beauty of family and sharing was all around me and I could feel it. Now, as I write, I still remember it. As I listened to the song I looked for the patriarch of the family. I needed to find Arnie. I had protocol and the gift of the quilt that I needed to present to him, to honor this day. I did start to remember.

I found him at the back of the hall and walked towards him with the quilt tucked under my arm. We greeted each other and I presented him with the gift and protocol. He thanked me for coming and told me that he would find a special older one to pass my gift on to. I had never been with Arnie at an event like this. It was special to see. I can see him as I write this and I can recall the events of the evening very clearly; they stay with me. He is a traditional man and he believes strongly in family.

As Arnie showed me around the hall, he introduced me to many of his family members. He invited me to sit with his family at the front of the hall and to help out when called upon. This was an honor that I proudly accepted. All five children were in attendance and his grandkids often tugged on his pant leg wanting to get up in his arms and be carried. Throughout the evening I had many moments to myself where I reflected with the sound of the drum in my ear. Somehow, the stories of school become more alive as I shared in this evening of remembrance.

As the night progressed, Arnie took me to the front of the hall and showed me two framed pictures. They were of the man I was here to honor, Joseph Paul, his father-in-law. Arnie spoke with great reverence as he told me stories of the past and explained the kind of man he had come to know. He told the stories as he showed me a picture of Joseph Paul in his traditional regalia. He talked of his father-in-law's great respect for culture and his role as a leader of his people. I saw in this picture a man that has many stories. The picture is a portrait from the side, and is filled with colors from the outfit that was designed for him. A cigarette gently rests on his lips.

The second photograph is an old black and white. In the picture, passed down to remember, a little baby rests in the arms of a family of three sitting in the grass with a tepee proudly raised in the background. The mother holds the baby in a tightly-wrapped leather bundle. The family sits cross-legged. No one smiles in the picture. I wonder who took this picture on this day and what the people were talking about. Arnie tells me that this was Joseph when he was young and that this is how life was back then. These photographs helped me understand a little more about what this day was all about.

I was here to reconnect with this family and to honor their request to attend this event before I began conversations with their daughter about her school stories. The protocol was different than what is typical, and far different than the way I have heard other school stories. However, I knew that I must follow the lead and do what Arnie asked me; it was the right way. As I think about the many stories that Skye and I shared while we were in school, I see now that we never reached the deeper layered stories during our time together. I am only now realizing that I did not see all her gifts.

On this Friday night I watched Skye show me many layers, those that were not visible within the larger high school setting. I wonder why she had been unable to present this side of her story. I wonder if I had been truly listening. I watched Skye differently this evening as she took her nieces and nephews by the hand and showed them how to dance, the real way, the right way, always hand-in-hand.

What it Means to Dance . . . Moving Away and Then Coming Back Home

As I sat with Skye's family on this special evening, we shared thoughts and stories of the past. Skye spoke of the different ways in a big city. She said that it was different than where she came from. She talked about reserves that are close to the city and how they can change people. She shared a story about some boys from the nearby reserve who also attended the same high school as she had.

She talked of the past and changed her expression as she spoke. She said that these boys would make fun of her for holding hands during a round dance and for participating in cultural ceremonies. She told me this story for the first time on this evening. She said they laughed about this and said it was stupid. As time went on, she told me, she quit talking about it and eventually quit doing it. She put her outfits away.

Her story amazed me. She said to me, "life changes you in the city" and that she should have "never quit dancing . . . but Lessard I will get back to it. I am getting a new outfit made." When I think of the time spent and all the conversations with her that I have had, I think of this story and how she held onto it. I wondered why she waited until now to tell me. I wondered what other stories I didn't get to know.

As the night continued, I often sat alone thinking about how this occasion was beautiful. It was powerful to see families coming together and sharing in the dances and the song. I thought this must be the way the Creator meant for things to be, where families shared together. It was real and intimate. At this dance there were no alternative substances to help me or anyone else feel good and to mask our emotions. The drums kept beating and the voices kept changing as new singers entered the circle. The songs

were played for many different reasons. The songs were played to honor Joseph Paul. Singers came from many Nations and travelled great distances to sing a song for this man. During this evening there was no competition, just people coming together to remember.

I listened closely to the many honor songs and I helped throughout the evening by bringing the drummers water and by serving the lunch to the Elders. Later in the evening, Skye and her mom took me by the hand and told me, "Come on, Lessard, come and dance with us." I reluctantly and nervously entered the circle and followed their lead as they helped me to remember.

I danced many times throughout that evening and listened up close with Skye as she provided the back up vocals for her father's honor song. I remember it this way. As we gathered around the circle I watched and the family joined Arnie as he sang, holding his grandson in one arm and beating the drum with the other. He never missed a beat; he was leading for his family in a real good way.

Three Sisters

I had arranged to meet with Skye in her new city which required a road trip. The drive was a peaceful 3-hour journey that helped me to focus my thoughts on the conversational relationship. I had never really come to know Skye's early school stories and I was eager to learn more about the past. I wondered how our previous relationship would impact the way the conversation would flow. I wondered if I would be able to use the tape recorder to help record the stories or would this fit into the way we talked. These

are the questions that continued to cross my mind as I made my way down the highway, anticipating our future conversation.

I had many thoughts about her high school stories based on how I was situated within them as a teacher. However, the high school stories were only a small part of her stories. I needed to find out about the Skye that I didn't know. I needed to have conversations that looked at her life differently than the way that I knew. I had to re-imagine what life was like for her in a different place than the one that I had come to know.

I met Skye at a local shopping mall. Her new job involved working the night shift so she came to our meeting place with no sleep. The interesting part of Skye, as I am getting to know her in a different way, is that very few things are done individually. A conversation sometimes means a conversation with the people she chooses to bring along. I had anticipated meeting Skye for roughly an hour and I assumed wrongly that it would be a simple exercise of visiting, catching up on the past, and talking about school as we shared. The picture that I had in my mind was much different than the picture we created. Skye's two sisters also wanted to visit and with them came her little nephew who was also a part of this family conversation. At first I was nervous because it was not how I thought it would be but as we moved forward with the conversation, the sisters created a story for me that helped me understand.

The setting was a busy food court and it initially felt like I was in a job interview as I looked across the table and the oldest sister, Skye, and her youngest sister prepared to answer my questions about school. I started off with questions about school places. To

me it felt like a panel with the three sisters answering questions and debating times, facts, and locations. The girls would often help each other remembering the schools of the past and the stories that took place within them.

Skye told her story of school as involving movement between her reserve and an urban centre. Her story of school started with a city school in Kindergarten and then back to the reserve for Grade 1. Her memories of school and place are vague. She did not remember specific school names or places. She could only tell me whether or not she was at the reserve or in the city. Her story of early elementary school involved moving between the city and the reserve until Grade 3. From Grade 3 until Grade 7 she spent time at the reserve school. The family relocated to a different reserve school for Grades 8 and 9. The story of school and movement resonated with me. We carefully charted a time line that the sisters helped me to develop. The school names or the names of teachers were not looked at as important details to consider. The girls could not remember specific names; they only remembered the stories that took place during these times. The story of school involved change and adaptability based on job opportunities for the family, reserve housing lists, and personal tragedy.

The stories of school began to appear and, with them, some of the sadness that rests with them. The girls' stories of school and their recollections of school are varied. Despite the great diversity and vantage points shared, the sisters all remembered their lack of photographs and the few school book memories that they had. The story the sisters shared with me is about a Christmas that they missed when their house burned down. The family lost everything on Christmas Eve and they remembered the dates and

memories of it. The girls told me that they remember it at every Christmas and that there was something wrong with the furnace causing a fire. Their lives were interrupted and the evidence of the past became lost. The photographs and cultural reminders were destroyed leading the family to another new location and another new school. The past has many stories that I did not know. The importance of photographs in their current lives becomes more evident to me. The photographs of their grandfather are invaluable reminders of the past. I was beginning to understand more as I listened.

Teachings From Our Parents

The stories of school shifted back and forth from sports to the classroom and to the in-betweens. The story of place and learning from parents was evident in many of the stories shared that afternoon. The girls talked about learning differently and sticking up for each other in school. They talked about opportunities and how sports helped them out. They spoke of having next to nothing growing up and practicing golf on the dirt fields at the reserve, far removed from the places where I learned. The stories helped me to understand a part of their personal journeys.

The girls recalled times in the past when their mom and dad taught them sports, dancing, and culture. They laughed when they told stories and corrected each other along the way, sometimes disagreeing on the small details. As they told their stories, they moved backwards in time to the intergenerational connections they shared with their cultural roots. They told me they had been practicing and learning about culture and traditional dancing since they were babies. I now know, by walking alongside them, that

their cultural roots come from a place. The passing down of knowledge through the act of participation is a thread that weaves throughout their lives. The cultural stories and knowledge started before them and before their parents as they told me stories about their grandfather who was a gifted man. As they told me stories about their grandfather, a gifted man, I understood how their cultural stories and knowledge had started before them or their parents. Their grandfather was a song maker and singer. He was a very spiritual person with special gifts. The girls spoke proudly of their grandmothers and grandfathers and how culture had always existed in their family.

“I Am the Luckiest Kid in the World”

For me, the words “I am the luckiest kid in the world” defined our conversation on this day. Skye and her sisters talked about times when things were not so good at school. A story that Skye told me takes her back to Grade 7 at the reserve school where her dad was the school patrol officer. He found her smoking behind the school with some other girls. The sisters laughed as they shared this story with me. They told me that their mom at this time was a smoker but after that day she quit. She not only quit; she went into the school the next day and started an anti-tobacco group for the youths. Skye became the lead student. The girls laughed hard about this story and as they did, Skye interjected, “I am the luckiest kid in the world! My parents care. A lot of people’s parents weren’t around. Our parents were always around.” The sisters all agreed.

I asked Skye what brought her to the high school where I met her. She told me that her parents wanted a better opportunity for her, and that the conditions in the

community school were challenging. The decision to move to the city and start at a new high school was hard because it was so different than what she had become used to at the reserve.

I now asked Skye about her experience at the high school and her first days in class. I asked her if she could remember. She told me that there were a lot of nice teachers. The work was difficult. It was different than what she had seen before. She said it was hard to do things by yourself in a new city. She was used to having her parents around. During her time in the city she lived with her older brother and she had to learn to become responsible for her own school routine.

She also told me about some of her feelings coming from a new place and how she often felt low as a student. She explained to me an experience she had during one of the first days in class. The class went to a local driving range to play golf. She told me she was excited to attend because this was her favourite sport. However, she missed the school bus because she was not familiar with public transportation in this new city. She arrived late to the driving range but she still managed to walk there by herself. When she arrived, the teacher stopped the class and told everybody to “look at who is late.” He then asked her where she was. She replied, “I am not a city person, I got lost.” He laughed and said, “Are you sure about that? Are you sure you didn’t get lost at the mall?” She told me, “And then, with everyone looking at me, they started to laugh.”

Skye did not remember too many stories from high school but this story stayed with her long after. She said, “I felt like quitting right there and going home. But then he would have been right about me.” She said that day when she was at the driving range, “I

felt like he thought I was just another dumb Indian. But he changed his mind when he saw that I could golf.” She said, “I felt this way many times, especially being a female native golfer. It is different, Lessard, because it’s not what people expect. They judge you before they see you play. If you are good you are all right. They don’t expect you to be good.” This was a story that I could relate to.

Her story of golf while in high school is one that she largely plays down. Skye became the first female Aboriginal golfer in the past 10 years to make the local school team. Skye changed the way golf was viewed and how she was viewed by those who worked with her. She became a two-time provincial medalist in golf and won many individual trophies for her performances in the province. Skye gained many positive accolades for her success in sports. However, as the sports coaches moved in and out of her life, between the seasons her academic performance began to slide. Many times in her Grade 10 year I personally advocated a shift in programming to encourage tracking of her performance and consistency in the teachers she worked with. I was told that programs cannot be adjusted after the school year has started, and that if we do this for one student then we have to do it for others. I could see from the outside what was happening. I felt that the Grade 10 core courses were critical points in her schooling and suggested strategies to provide a better chance at successful completion. I feared what could happen if she was removed from her peer group and the few connections she was starting to develop.

The Grade 10 school year went by and Skye did not pass many of her core classes which required an adapted timetable in her Grade 11 year. The size of the school and the

individual stories of students are difficult to locate on the school landscape. Schools are filled with many students' stories that are similar to Skye's. Skye began her Grade 11 school year in classes with many Grade 10 students and, as she did the previous year, she started the school year off positively, attending regularly and completing her assigned work.

It seems when I write this that each of Skye's school years had a rhythm. She started off the school year playing volleyball and staying connected to students and staff through the sports that she played and the success she had within them. As the volleyball season ended, the first semester also came to an end and she was on track in her courses. During the second semester, the year-long classes often dragged and while no sports were being played, she struggled to maintain and would grow somewhat distant. The connections and relationships to people are what sustained Skye and other areas fit into them and around them based on the strength of the connection.

Skye worked hard through her Grade 11 year and managed to successfully complete many credits. Skye described her schooling the following way, "I didn't always understand my work and I am too shy to ask for help. I felt dumb." She told me often during our conversations that she struggled with the school work and it was different than what she had learned on the reserve; the pace was too fast. She told me, "Do you know that I am actually smart, Lessard? I was the class valedictorian in my Grade 9 class at the reserve." I replied by simply saying, "I know you are."

The Grade 12 school year started and Skye was not in attendance for the start of volleyball tryouts. Her Grade 12 year was a big year. Many of the girls asked each other

where she was or if they had heard from her over the summer. As far as I knew she should have been there. After the first week of school, and long after volleyball try outs, I recalled seeing Skye walk into the gym to tell me she was back. I walked over to greet her and her parents and I talked to them about their summer. I could sense that there was some uncertainty as to whether or not she would be coming to school in the city. I wondered what had changed over the summer. I wondered why the shift in their feelings. I knew by talking to her parents that they were concerned about their daughter and wondered if it was a good decision to return to the city for this school year.

The start to the school year did not go as I expected. The one area that Skye remained devoted to was always her sports. She started off the season a step slower and less confident in her abilities on the court. The performance in sports was the most insignificant part that I cared about, but it did tell me that life was shifting for her. I knew when watching her that something was different. I also knew that things were changing because she came late to practice and missed games, without any communication. In the 2 previous years she had never missed a game. She even played when she had minor injuries. She loved sports and never missed them. Skye had fallen off her path. She was attending class irregularly but my biggest concern was her distance. I knew her and I knew how she responded to embarrassment. She pulled away, went inside herself, and did not want to confront the difficulties that were taking place. I knew this was not what she wanted to do or who she wanted to be but I could not reach her. I had lost her. She became silent and unwilling to have a conversation. She was hurting.

I remember the last time I saw her in the school setting. The volleyball team had a tournament and she missed the first game without telling anyone. The coach decided that he had to make a statement and he benched her for the next two games. I remember looking at her as she sat with her hands on her knees, staring at the floor. She did not talk to anyone that day. She was the best player on the team, one of the leaders, and I wondered where she had been. I wondered what happened to her. I remember talking to her parents after the game and telling them that I was concerned. I told them I was worried about a number of things. I told them all that I could and that I didn't know how to help her at this moment.

I can still see them walking out of the gym with their little girl. This was the last time I saw her in my role as a teacher. This was the last moment that we shared before she moved to another city and eventually left her school story. I am happy that she moved and that she went home with her family to find herself again. I think at times we all need to go home to find out who we are and where we are going. Sometimes we need help. I believe that Skye and I helped each other out often throughout our time together. I know that she helped me to get back to a way that is good for me, a cultural way. She helped me to remember who I was and what I was forgetting. I think I am just starting to help her now, by continuing to believe in her and her school story. I believe that she will go back some day and follow the dreams that she has. I think in some ways she has already started. I look forward to sitting down with her and reading her this story. I wonder what she will think. I wonder what she will change. I wonder when she and her family will help teach me the next steps in my "Dance Me Home" song. I am hoping that when I hear

the drum and the voices singing in the background that I will continue to dance. I am hoping that I will be holding my little girl's hand teaching her the right way to dance, always in a circle, only in a circle.

A Narrative Account of Jules – Sean Lessard

Ball Cap and a Smile . . .

I came to the city over 10 years ago. When I used to come to the city to visit, I used to drive to the outskirts of town and have friends come meet me and guide me through this new place. I came to the city to study at the university. I arrived with ideas of life based on the limited experiences of my past. I entered this urban space as a small town kid who grew up on a farm and only travelled to the city to visit the mall on family vacations. Over time I have grown to appreciate and learn new ways in this big city.

However, I am disappointed to say that my life in the city sometimes makes me forget about the simplest things. I sometimes forget familiar smells and sounds or the joy in watching the seasons change all around me. I think of all these different feelings as I consider this narrative and find a way to capture the feeling of a special place in time. I think of the simple pleasures when I consider the youth in this story and how they derived joy and freedom in what many people would consider less than ideal conditions. The kids in this community found multiple ways to create stories of happiness and, in turn, they continue to allow me to look inside-out and help me to try and remember the important things in life . . . the simple and uncomplicated stories that are all around.

As I shift back in time I recall that the first few months in the big city were somewhat difficult. I was intimidated by the people and the pace. It was faster here. It was a busy way of life. I find meaning now as I look back in time and think about the past. I see that many of my current beliefs are situated in the past and nested within the stories of a community place. I continue to find myself drifting back to the downtown

spaces of a school. I am starting to remember my first days in this new place and various memories are surfacing.

I recall looking for a job when I first arrived in the city. I was looking for work with young people, the only job I had ever known. I picked up a large phone book, much bigger than I had ever seen, and started with the word "A" for Aboriginal. Through my search and various phone calls I managed to contact an organization who was looking for someone to work in a school with Aboriginal youth and families. I set up an interview and I was awarded the job and arranged a time where I could get familiar with the school. Little did I know that this school would become home for the next 3 years of my life. My daily routine would consist of going to university class in the morning and then making my way to my new place of work in the afternoon.

I still remember my first trip. I was holding a map in my hand and travelling on the train for the first time in my life. I made my way to the destination where I was supposed to exit but I didn't realize I was supposed to press the button to open the doors. I laugh at this memory now because it's raw . . . it was me at this place in time. I was taking a journey to a community I knew nothing about. It was far removed from the privileged vantage point I had experienced. I had a different view of life . . . a different lens to look at this place with. This place and the people within it taught me so much about who I am today. They brought me closer to home than I had ever been.

“Mustang Pride”

I finally arrived at the school and looked it up and down. It looked like a castle among the buildings that surrounded it. I looked at the playground, the sports field, and the signs on the front of the door. I observed the markings on the building which displayed its age of existence and the message from the past which included separate entrances clearly marked for boys and girls. The signs pointed to a time in the past and a history that created a story of this place long ago. I wondered what kind of school this place was going to be. I wondered how much different this place would be than the schools that I had to come to know. I have many memories of this school and the early moments of our relationship together. The first steps in the school were the “get to know you.” This was the point where I would decide how I felt about the place. I wondered what kind of relationship it would be. I wondered if it would feel welcoming. The only skills I could bring to this new job were my past experiences working with youth and the feeling I would get from a place. I was about to open the door to this new job. I remember being excited and nervous. I pulled on the handle of the big wooden door with the cement word “Boys” etched above me. I pulled on the door harder but it was locked to the outside world. I wondered about that message and tried to understand. I had to be buzzed into the school through an intercom. I had to state what my role was within the school and who I was looking to visit. Now, as I slide forward in time, I wonder what the parents feel when they have to ring the buzzer. I wonder if it makes it easier for people to not want to visit the school. I wonder only because I know what I was feeling on this first day. I know I was thinking about the negative. I was forming opinions and images

quickly in my mind about what this neighbourhood and community must be like. I was creating a picture before I even introduced myself.

After that first trip I always enjoyed the ride on the train. I would find sharp contrasts as I made my way over the river. I would start the trip alongside the trees and natural beauty and, as it progressed, the landscape would change drastically as I settled in the heart of the city. There was a different story in this place; one that was far removed from the spaces of the university classes. The community taught me a different way, one that operated on the values of listening and coming to know. It continues to teach me. I entered the school as a youth worker, not as a teacher, so my role was different. I was separate from the school conversations that were taking place. I relied on previous experiences and connected to the school community by volunteering to help out in coaching and within the classroom spaces. I sensed in those first few weeks a reluctance and distrust as my job had seen many people come and go. The space to trust and share was difficult to negotiate during the beginning stages.

Each day I went out and supervised students during recess and took part in the many games being played. One day I would be jumping rope, the next day playing basketball. I was always participating and getting to know the students and their places. As time progressed the school staff began to talk to me and to ask me about my job. The conversational relationships began to emerge and I was slowly becoming a part of a different space—part of a different community. The students at this school came from many areas of the world and had experiences that I could not fully understand. The school-life stories were sometimes very sad but were viewed with optimism by the

parents who had experienced a different reality in their home countries. The youths in this place taught me the basics through food, customs, and small greetings in their languages.

In working with the youths, I learned many lessons about place and particularly about how place and community are interwoven. Those of us who worked and lived in the place called *school* were connected through complex relationships with those who lived in the neighborhood. Students, of course, lived in both places. Sometimes those who lived in the school and those who lived in the community found ways to weave their lives through each other, creating patterns that seemed full of possibility for students', families', and teachers' lives. At other times they operated in isolation, seemingly to protect their familiar stories, the ones that worked for them. During my work I often negotiated ways in which I could understand where I fit into the multiplicity of these interwoven places on the landscape. I listened carefully to the stories that emerged.

My job at the school was to develop a mentorship program for Aboriginal students. I did not quite know how I was going to navigate this job at first so I relied on my previous experiences. I started an after school recreation program. The only *hitch* was that before we could play we had to do an hour of homework. I recognized that homework and reading were important areas to work on with the youths. I set up my work station at a small table in the library. I was surrounded by books in a peaceful place where we could begin our work.

In the first few weeks, the youths attended sparsely, but as students came to know me they began to arrive. The mandate of my job was to work with Aboriginal students. I

quickly changed my mandate as students from all backgrounds began to enter that library and ask if they could do some homework so they could play in the gym later in the evening. I remember the many different students in various grades working together. The place was slowly becoming special.

In the old library is where I recall meeting a student named Jules. I have many memories of students in the past, but Jules and her school story often entered my mind. I remember her and her friends, always arriving in a group, never by themselves. They started off very shy and reserved but, as time progressed, they began to open up and become more comfortable. Jules and her friends would often teach me little details about their south Asian culture. They shared food and told me about their traditions. They taught me as I tutored them in their subjects and, through the interactions, we began to take care of each other, regardless of where we were from. We learned together by sitting at the table, sharing meals, and reading about subjects far removed from the experiences of this place. I still look at this time and place with great fondness and stay connected to many of the young people I came to know at the library.

I think Jules said it best: “It’s a great place to be. It’s in the inner city and everything but you have to go there to see how the kids really are. When you live there for a long time you end up loving it. You love it . . . I just think people should see for themselves, go to the area, go to the school.” I think if I remember correctly we also called it “Mustang Pride,” naming it after the school team name; it was something we could hold onto regardless of where we all came from.

Creating Our Space For Freedom

I think about those times and the dynamics of the space. It was special. It was freedom. And it was created not by me or the school. It was created by the kids and passed on year to year. It became a storied place that the youth carefully protected. It was a haven from the outside worries. The kids looked forward to the time spent together. They told stories of the gym to new students wanting to participate. The idea of Mustang Pride took on a life of its own and, even though this took place long ago, they still remember. The young ones played with the older ones and ages did not matter. I remember the gymnasium housing between 40 and 50 students playing sports, reading books, dancing, and being free.

At one point in time I recall being brought to the office where my boss was waiting for me to discuss the students who were non-Aboriginal participating in activities. I remember trying to explain that I couldn't exclude kids from playing together and that it wasn't costing the company any money, only my time. I thought that it was great for our Aboriginal youth to be walking alongside the students that they went to school with in a different way . . . a good way. This was an early tension that I had to navigate, it was based on policy. I wonder about policy and rules when we create spaces that divide or exclude. I wonder if the kids felt different in this space and how they would have reacted if I excluded a part of their school community? I learned from this tension and the conversation with my company about only working with Aboriginal youths. I continued to open up the library and gym spaces and to work with the community who

came to the table. Many times my days were much longer than what I was getting paid for but who could really call this work?

Dreaming About the Past . . .

I initially talked to Jules during her lunch break at a busy mall where she was managing a retail store. We shared details about the past and the special moments we experienced at Rutherford Heights School. We talked initially about past friendships and the memorable teachers that taught her during that time in her life. Her reaction to my many questions and the ease in returning to this moment brought me back to the school, the gym, the library, and all the places where I walked alongside Jules and her friends, trying to help them navigate school and life spaces. It seemed back then, as I think about it now, that the world and its choices and opportunities were all very available to us . . . they were within reach. We often dreamed about the future together. I remember talking about traveling and seeing the world. The idea of going to university or college was a regular conversation that took place. I explained to Jules during our conversation that I wanted to hear her stories of school and that I thought they were important. I wanted to share her school experiences and the story of community. I told her that I would like people who read her story to see the many layers that young people have to navigate to complete their high school credits. I explained that I would like to share the story of Mustang Pride and how it can be created and how it can become lost in the school-life story that exists. As I write this I begin to wonder what makes kids stop seeing their dreams. I wonder what makes them less hopeful about the future. I wonder if Jules

continues to dream in the same way she once did. I am hoping that she continues to dream.

Earliest Memories of School

As we sipped on coffee, Jules explained to me that she had many positive memories of school. She recalled her early school stories and how she moved to a part of the city that was different than what she had experienced. She spoke of Grade 1 at this school and how she could remember her family moving to this new part of town. She could remember Grade 1 and her classroom. She even remembered specific details about the teacher and the classroom space. Jules explained to me in this moment what it was like being different from the other students. She told me a story about her lunch and the fact that she ate foods that many kids had not seen before. Her mom was an excellent cook and would pack traditional Asian food for her lunch and the kids would often say, “eww, what is that . . . it’s gross” and they would make fun and laugh. Jules said that she did not blame the kids. It was just that they had never seen this type of food so that was probably why they made fun of her. Sitting with Jules at the mall takes me back and it reminds me of her when she was much younger. She remains the same humble and quiet girl that I played sports with on the school field. Back then she would rarely say a bad word about people or be in a confrontation. She would never blame people and often try to find the good in situations. It seems to me that she has not changed.

“I Remember Being Different”

Jules continued to share stories about the school in a different neighbourhood with different kids. She told a story about a teacher and a set of crayons. She remembered the special pack of crayons that her mom saved up to buy for her. She explained to me the teacher was missing a set of 64 Crayolas™. It was a special pack with many colors.

I had a set that my mom had bought for me. The teacher told all the kids to take everything out of their desks and to empty them on the floor. I emptied my desk and the teacher noticed that I had a 64 pack. She came up to me and raised her voice, saying to me that I stole them. She took me out of my desk by the arm and moved me out of the way and turned my desk upside down, emptying everything on the floor. I remember this teacher and I remember that I just wanted my crayons back that my mom bought for me with her money. I did not steal them but she took them from me anyways. I didn't like that school.

After that year Jules told me that she moved to the *inner city*. She said, “You remember where I live Sean. My mom still lives there. That is where we moved to.” She continued to explain, “I attended the same school from Grade 2 to Grade 9 . . . it was right around the corner from my house.” When I reflect on Jules's stories I go back to the old neighbourhood in my mind. It feels right. It reminds me of a simpler time and the beauty and freedom of youth. I suppose I remember it based on where I was in my life but I feel like there was something different going on at that place at that time. It was different. I just didn't realize it. I had no experience to compare it with until now. It

would be difficult to recreate that magic but I can still see it as Jules reminds me of the past through her many stories of school.

Jules talked often about the old days at Rutherford Heights and how it was a supportive environment filled with activities. She talked about the principal and the teachers with great respect and I could tell by her ease in telling the stories that they are not that far removed from her memories. She told me that she still sees the teachers in the mall or when she goes home to visit her mom in that same house that she grew up in. She also told me that she still visits and maintains friendships with many of the students that she went to school with during this time. She recalled fondly, and spoke proudly of, her early beginnings in school, telling many good stories and laughing about the games we used to play.

I am thinking of the many stories and memories in this community. I slide back in time and can still see the many banners hanging from the rafters in the gym and the stage at the front for all to see. I remember the music playing as we put our books to the side, safely resting them underneath the benches. Many of the youth started on stage and listened to the music, dancing in their own way to the beats that created this freedom space. The girls, Jules among them, practiced moves they no doubt had seen on television. They mixed the traditional dances with the sounds and songs of contemporary artists. I remember there was always laughing and freedom to move. The kids loved this time where the gym was their domain and space to play. Many of us non-dancers would set up the floor hockey nets and divide teams, playing a mock Stanley Cup championship well past supper time and into the early evening. We played in the gym three to four

times per week and each evening we played for many hours developing our Mustang Pride and creating a space that slowly began to include the individual stories of the youth.

As Jules continued to remind me of the past she recalled a story of a “real fun” class that she was in during Grade 7 and 8 and how they were notorious for their laughter. I remembered this class and working with the various students. Jules recited many names of students that I can picture and she spoke of one student in particular. He had a minor speech impediment and oversized glasses. She told me that he was different than the other kids but in our “real fun” class “we loved him.”

He was our friend and I still keep in contact with him after all these years. I remember how we used to be so tight in this class. We would get detention for giggling through classes, and then we would giggle through detention. We were good students and just liked being around each other so it wasn't really a punishment to go to detention.

I laughed when she told me this story because I remembered the voices of the teachers and how they wondered what they might do with this group of students who didn't take class seriously.

Jules shifted her thoughts of that class and began to talk about the community outside of school. She said she never worried about the neighbourhood and that, as friends, they often stuck together and looked out for one another. She explained,

I think people only say it's bad because there are a lot of homeless people and people with addiction problems. It's not like that every day . . . like people say or what they hear. They are saying these things from where they are coming from . .

. or where they came from. Where we live it is fine. People should just go around and see.

She told me that many of the students that I worked with from this time period did not make it through school. Many of them left when they went to high school. She also reminded me that many left much more than high school. Jules began to recall names and stories of students that have passed on. She told me stories that I had not heard. She said that the inner city has a way about it, and that you hear things about the people you know. “Information passes it’s way down to you, even when you haven’t seen the person for a long time.”

Leaving a Life Behind ... Starting New

Many people passed by as we sat on the park bench and continued to share stories of the past. Our conversation on that afternoon centered on the old neighbourhood and on the stories of growing up. I asked about the traditions of her family and wanted to hear the story of Jules’s mom. I had known her mom for many years but my conversations were often limited due to the language barrier that existed between us. Her mom often relied on the traditional language so it made it difficult to communicate. I wanted to hear the stories of her mom because I knew she was an important piece of Jules’s life, and I also remembered the tough stories that her mom faced raising her family in an unfamiliar place.

I started off by asking Jules how her mom liked being a grandma and she told me that she helped so much with her little daughter. Jules told me that her relationship with

her mom has changed because of her daughter and the role that she is now playing in her life. I asked Jules about her mom and when she first came to Canada. She explained to me that this year her mom was finally going to go back to her home country. She left because of the war to give her family a new start. She told me, “my mom has not seen her mom since she was 12 years old. I have only seen pictures of my grandma and talked to her on the phone. I don’t know what she is like.” This story really stayed with me and it helped me to understand another side of this family story. I didn’t recall hearing this story. I wondered how many other stories I missed. I wondered how schools could come to understand and learn from these protected stories.

Jules continued to tell me about her mom and other family members, some of whom I knew. She talked about her three brothers and how she always looked up to her oldest brother and how he taught her to play sports at a young age. She remembered watching him play sports when she was in elementary and she remembered feeling “crushed when he moved to a new city to attend university.”

Jules had many feelings about her family and, in particular, her one brother who was 2 years older. He had difficulties in life and spent time in and out of detention centres. She spoke of her brother with some anxiety because she felt he should have cared more for her when she was growing up. She explained that she had a difficult time due to the way he treated her. She explained that after her two oldest brothers moved out to go to college, “It was just me and my one brother at home. He was often in charge of the family and felt like he was the man of the house.” There were many stories Jules shared with me and it is a piece of the family puzzle that she continued to struggle with.

She reminded me that she had multiple jobs in Grade 9. When she was paid she gave money to her mom, stepdad, and her brother. At the end of it “I would have a little money for myself . . . just you know to help out around the house.” Her frustrations increased because each time she worked and received pay her brother would reappear in her life and “keep track of her payments.” She told me, “he would say to me, ‘I want my money.’ I’m like, ‘no, I have nothing.’ He would say that I was lying . . . ‘You just got paid today.’ ” He took most of her money on pay days and left a small amount each time for her. She said, “I was bullied you know, like.” As Jules told me this story, I saw the complexity and recognized the importance of the gym and the library and all the spaces that we co-created with the other kids from the neighbourhood. We found a haven from the other parts of life that were difficult to understand and cope with.

I asked her about her oldest brother and if life was different when he was home. She explained to me through a small story.

My oldest brother was the best . . . he always took care of me and would talk to me on the phone when it was difficult. I remember he used to put money in my purple piggy bank that I had since I was a kid. I used to get change and bills and put them in there to save . . . I think I got close to one hundred dollars in change. I saved for over a year straight. I came home from school one day and the head of my piggy bank was cut off and my one brother had taken all my money. If my oldest brother was home this would have never happened. He is the one I always ran to when something bad happened.

As she told the story I could see that her oldest brother was similar to the gym space, a haven from the difficult times and someone to communicate with when life proved too difficult. Jules never spoke badly about her family or her brother that had taken her money. She was frustrated telling the story but with more sadness than anger. She said that regarding her oldest brother that “it was the saddest day for me in my life because he was the only one there for me and I felt like when he left that I had no one. It was like no one would be home.”

Balancing Tradition – “It is a Balance Trying to Find My Identity”

I shifted the conversation from family and asked questions about traditions. I wanted to inquire into the past and her family’s relation to it. Jules told me that she still goes to the temple occasionally for cultural celebrations. She said that this part of her life was still important but there were many times in the past where she would get frustrated with her culture, the traditions, and the expectations from the community. She reminded me of the time when she had a boyfriend in school who was from a different culture. She said, “It became difficult to handle because many people in my community would talk about it . . . they felt like I was being a bad influence on the other girls. They talked about me and it hurt because it is just what they heard.” Jules told me many stories of the balance that she tried to maintain and that she was constantly trying to please her mom by following her traditions but that she also wanted to experience life in her own way.

I used to get so frustrated with my mom I would tell her, “I am your daughter, please say something . . . stick up for me.” You see, in our culture it’s about being

proper . . . girls don't do this, girls don't do that, girls stay home and cook and clean. I was supposed to be one of those girls but I wasn't . . . they thought really bad if I did things differently. People judged me and they didn't even know me.

As Jules told me her story of culture and identity I began to wonder if this was why she felt like she needed to try a new school and a new beginning. Was this one of the reasons why she moved away from her friends and went to a different high school after junior high?

Jules explained to me that at the end of her Grade 9 school year she felt an increasing level of stress. She said,

I would tell my mom I am not rushing into marrying or a relationship. I don't always want to cook, clean, and do everything a woman has to do in my culture. I don't want to be set up with someone and arranged . . . I don't want to be with someone that I don't care for or love. I told her that I wouldn't go through with it.

Jules talked of the tension between her and her mother and how it led to many arguments about the *old ways* and traditions. Her life story had many layers and it impacted her school rhythm. However, it seemed that Jules found a way to navigate each part of her life. She must have constantly balanced the cultural narratives, her family stories, and school stories, keeping them somewhat separate and navigating them when they intersected. Her stories on the school landscape included the cultural traditions but, as time passed, the challenges and expectations became more difficult.

Travelling to High School – Trying to Negotiate an Unfamiliar Landscape

“I would like to be an astronaut . . . I would like to go to space”

Jules began to share her experiences in high school. She said that she wanted to “get away” from the inner city and start a “new life.” She decided to enroll in a school that was across the city and away from the friendships that she had developed in the past. She said, “To get to school I used to get up at 6:00 a.m. and be on the bus by 7:00 a.m.” She told me about the daily routine and path she took and that she rode the bus for an hour every day. “I wanted to get out of the inner-city so I went to Lincoln High . . . I didn’t have any friends there . . . I just kept to myself.”

Jules reminded me that I was also at the school at this time in my new role as a teacher, and that it seemed like a great idea to go to Lincoln High because it had many options. It was different. She talked about the first days in high school and all the nervousness that came with it. She also remembered the try-outs for the volleyball team. Jules had previously played all sports in junior high and was a dominant athlete at that level. However, she entered a new landscape where many athletes played year round and attended elite sport camps throughout the summer. The new landscape was different than the opportunities that she had experienced in her school-life story. She said, “I went to the first day of try-outs but I was just scared . . . it was a new school . . . a new year . . . I just stopped. I used to play every sport in junior high but this was different.” It was a different kind of place, a place that was difficult to negotiate and feel comfortable within. I wonder how kids can experience such different stories in a city and school system that

is relatively small. I wonder what other stories of difference exist for kids in this school-life system.

Through the stories of sports and this initial fear of trying out for a sport that Jules had previously enjoyed success in, I began to see the challenges that she faced. Jules told me that she walked “15 to 20 minutes past the police station to the bus stop, and that some mornings it was real cold to be walking.” Her routine and challenges in school magnified as the snow began to fall and the weather posed another barrier. Despite the difficult circumstances Jules continued to attend classes and to try to navigate her way through this new school place. As the school year progressed she met some friends and began to meet them at a bus stop on the way to school each day.

I remember meeting some kids that were also going to Lincoln High . . . I guess you could call them skater kids. They were the ones that us shy kids get along with . . . they don't judge us. I liked talking to the one girl and we became friends. I noticed sometimes that she and her friends didn't attend classes. I tried doing this also . . . and stayed away from a class from time to time because I liked having some friends, someone to hang out with. The one friend I met stopped coming to school, she missed more and more . . . it felt like there was no one there. I got lonely again. I didn't have anyone to see so I started staying home more. I used to live for the sports and activities and then I liked going to school to be with a friend. I tried and tried to go back and back but there was something there . . . no motivation to go.

I talked to her in this moment of sharing about a story she told near the beginning of our conversations together. I asked her if she remembered telling me the story about her in Grade 4 when the teacher asked what she wanted to be. She had told the teacher on that day that she “wanted to be an astronaut.” I am thinking about the power in this statement and how kids at a young age seldom see the barriers that exist. She had a dream and a vision that included school but as the landscape changed drastically it was as if the dreams became dampened or forgotten. I wonder what it is about the transition from junior high to high school that makes it so difficult. I wonder how many students feel similar to Jules and reach out in loneliness to find where they are located on the high school landscape. I wonder what I can do differently as a high school teacher in this space.

Jules continued to tell me stories of high school.

I guess I just got lazy eventually. I just started to give up and lost my motivation for going. I think I began losing school because of the distance from where I lived, it sure made it difficult. I would get up and it was always real cold in the house and I was tired and quit looking forward to going to school. I started getting behind in classes and didn't know anyone. Eventually I just stayed at home.

Jules and I met four times for conversations. Each time we met we discussed a wide variety of topics but we often went back to the stories of family. Jules is currently managing a retail outlet and is the proud mother of a 2-year-old daughter. I appreciate the stories that Jules shared with me and the way she continues to teach me. She spoke of her

daughter often in her stories. I asked her about what it meant to not graduate . . . if it impacted her life in the present? She explained to me,

School has never left my mind or my heart. It is just that I have more responsibilities I have to worry about. Everybody has different reasons when they leave school. I think I would get a GED but I really want the real thing . . . the real deal to get a diploma some day.

We continued this conversation about the past and I asked her how she felt about the term “dropout” when referring to her school story. She simply replied, “I don’t view myself this way at all. If you dropped out . . . it is more like you don’t go to school . . . you don’t do nothing for yourself . . . you don’t work . . . you don’t have nothing going for yourself. I still have something going for myself.” When she explained this to me, and where she is located regarding labels, I can see the complexity and the many stories of school and life that exist for youths. I am troubled by the definitions. I do not see a “dropout” when I look at Jules. I look back in my memories and see the young kid in the school places who had many thoughts on life and dreams for the future. Perhaps her dreams may have shifted but I believe as she tells me about her daughter that she is imagining a different story for her when she goes to school.

I want her to finish school regardless of anything. If she says to me one day I don’t want to go to school no more, I’d want to know why. I would sit down and ask her why, what’s going on . . . what’s wrong. I think every parent’s dream is to see their kids finish school. I will help her because I think school is important. I used to be a good student . . . I used to be a very good athlete. Do you remember?

I nodded in agreement as she told me this story. Our relationship is much different now than what it was when I saw her in the school and community places. Life moved both of us in different directions but it was good to be sitting on the park bench and sharing stories of the past on that day.

“Candle Light Stories”

Jules told me at the beginning of our conversations together a story about school and the stories that I didn't know as a teacher and community support who worked with families. Despite the fact I spent time with Jules anywhere from 4 to 5 days a week, there were stories that I did not consider or become aware of until now. Jules worked hard in school and was well thought of by teachers and students. I recalled when she told me this story the tensions that would exist between home and school when it came to Jules being on time in the morning for class. Jules explained it to me in the following way.

Did you know that many times I would go to sleep by myself with nothing but a candle for light . . . sometimes there were days when the power would get cut off. I told her (mom) you need to stop. We don't have money for anything, how about groceries, how about lunch or school and stuff. And we wouldn't have any money . . . spent all your money and we're left with nothing. And I began to cry.

Jules had many stories and she created a cover story for many years, remaining in silence to protect the story that was being played out on her landscape. I wonder how school and community can come together to share stories when life gets difficult for kids. I wonder what other stories Jules didn't share and why she chose to tell me this one now.

As Jules told me this story I remember the feeling in my stomach and the feelings that came to me. I worked and shared many moments with Jules in my capacity as a youth worker, but I did not realize that she was living out this story.

Despite a very strong connection to Jules, I did not see this part of her story. I wonder why schools don't provide marks for survival. I wonder what I would have done in a similar situation. What decisions would I make regarding school? Would it still be an important place for me? Jules negotiated the many challenges in her life with a smile on her face and a gentle demeanour. She participated in sports at the highest level and represented both the boys' and girls' teams in multiple sports. I can still see her in my mind on the school grounds that were surrounded by many buildings at the centre of the city landscape. We chased the soccer balls and baseballs that soared over the wire fence and bounced across the busy street that lined our field. I remember growing up in this space as a youth worker and spending time with some amazing kids like Jules who were oblivious to the troubles that surrounded the fields that we played in. As I reflect on this story of school and hope I remember to continue to get back to this good place in my teaching practice and reignite my Mustang Pride.

A Narrative Account of Leanne – Sean Lessard

A point guard in the game of basketball is an important position; some would even call it the voice of the coach on the floor or a player coach. The point guard's role is vital because the person who plays this position is responsible for running the offence. They call out the plays and distribute the ball to formulate a good scoring opportunity. The point guard is also a player that must be able to handle pressure. This special player handles the ball more than any player on the court, surveying the basketball landscape and trying to make the best decision to contribute to team success.

As I write this, I am thinking of a poster that hangs on the walls of a large urban high school in central Alberta. The poster is of a female student athlete who starred in this high school as a point guard for the basketball team. She led them to a city championship and three straight trips to the provincial tournament, an impressive resume for any high school player in any sport. The poster is fresh in my mind because I looked at it often as I walked down the hallway of this high school, first as a teacher and recently as a project associate at the local university.

The picture is of a female athlete dribbling a basketball with two other players trying to intercept her eventual path to the basket. A look of fierce competition is etched across her face and an inner drive emerges from the simple snap shot made into a poster for all to see. As I think of this poster and reflect on her story, my story, and our conversations about school I have many thoughts and questions that remain unanswered. In the span of a 3-month time period I have had numerous conversations with the girl pictured on that basketball poster. Her name is Leanne. Through our shared stories I have

learned a great deal about myself and my role as a teacher and future leader in education. I am deeply honoured to be telling this point guard story.

Point Guard Stories – Tuesday, January 20, 2009

I am excited about the phone call I received earlier today. I had a message from Leanne, a student I once knew. We were in contact because I wanted to ask her about being a participant in a project I was working on at the local university. As a teacher at a local high school, I often sat on the sidelines watching and cheering on our teams and supporting the individual students I knew through hallway conversations and teaching moments.

Leanne had an electric way of being and by this I mean she had presence. She was extremely popular with both teachers and students and, when playing her sports, she brought a flair for the dramatic. The way she described playing her sports was “being free” and I observed her play many sports in this way. The way that I remembered Leanne is through her gifts in sports, academics, and her ability to connect with people. She was filled with confidence and competed at a high level in her pursuit of school and life success.

Her days at school could be described as busy. Rarely would I see her without someone tagging along; most everyone was eager to hear her stories. I can still picture her walking through the hallway and running down the basketball floor. She would take it to the hoop with no sense of fear, an open path, and expected reality that she would succeed in these games—both life and basketball.

My view of Leanne comes from a place and a certain way of viewing the world. Sometimes people only look at one way of knowing and being. When they do this, they do not see the sideways stories that are emerging. The sideways stories I am writing about were always right there but perhaps they weren't the stories that we wanted to hear. I wonder if we, as teachers and coaches, had a hand in shaping who we thought she should be. I wonder what would have happened if we had asked her what her other interests were. What did she like beyond sports? I am only now just getting to know.

The way I viewed her story was narrow and one that was dominated by the successful student athlete and the model student. This was an easy story to see and hear. But as I entered a conversation and looked backwards and forwards through the memories and shared stories, it became evident that this was not the only story. I tell this story with one part regret because I failed to ask questions and to listen, to really listen. I failed to disrupt the tendency to watch from the sidelines and intersect when the path of schooling became difficult for her to navigate. I was silenced by inaction, wishing that I would have been more vocal in her school story. I wonder if I had taken action and asked different questions if it would have changed her stories.

A Different Story to Live By

I knew Leanne through the paths of two strong women in her life: her sister who I taught and her mother who I came to know through the teaching stories and through watching moments when I supported the team. Without looking at her family and particularly the influence of the female presence in her life this story seems incomplete.

The sisters in this family are similar in appearance. They are two of eight family members. They are similar in many ways but sharp contrasts appear as I listened and observed their ways of knowing and doing.

Leanne's older sister, as I remember, was extremely focused in both life and school. She was a student and a person who had a very clear path in her mind spiritually and vocationally. I remember our conversations in the classroom and hearing stories of a young man in another province that she intended to marry at the completion of her Grade 12 year. My initial thoughts were of young love and relationships. However, as I listened to her throughout the year, I began to understand that this was her intended purpose and, as she said, she did. I wonder if I really ever got to know Leanne without the stories and expectations of her sister and family. I wonder if other teachers felt the same. I wonder if it was with this view that we looked at her actions and created a wall of expectations not allowing room for growth and the freedoms that she wanted to experience. The way I see it and debate it in my mind often, sometimes wondering out loud and sometimes in silence, how could we not see that she struggled with her path. Perhaps I was hoping that this different story would stay away or move on and not impact the success rhythm that was being played out in the classroom and on the basketball court. Why did I only want to hear the basketball stories? With these thoughts on my mind, I entered a conversational relationship with Leanne and a chance to reconnect with the past and to hear her school stories.

Reconnecting (Moving Backwards . . . Stopping in the Present . . . Imagining the Future)

I met a former student shopping one day and we briefly shared memories of the past. We talked about life in school and outside of school and how fast time goes by. I asked about many of his friends and I specifically asked if he ever crossed paths with Leanne. He told me that he saw her often and that he would tell her that I said “hi.” He told me that I should just contact her and that she would be happy to hear from me. I took a chance and reached out into cyberspace with a note in the form of an email. I was hoping for a reply and didn’t know what she would think because of the time that had passed and the new life stories that made meeting a difficult arrangement to negotiate. To my surprise she replied a few days later with an email and then a phone call setting up a time to meet at a local coffee shop. This coffee shop became a great place to reconnect with a former student and to talk about some of the memories of school days gone past.

Coffee Table Conversations (February 5, 2009, 3:30 p.m.)

The feelings I had about seeing Leanne ranged from eager anticipation to an awkward nervousness. I was thinking about how I could ask her to participate in a project that I was involved in at the university, how would I explain it. I thought that she would probably not have time or that she would think that this was so not “cool.” I was wondering what our meeting would be like. What would we talk about? All these fears soon left me as she appeared around the corner. As we saw each other we laughed and we gave each other a big hug. I was glad to see her and happy that she was doing well. I was

mostly happy that she was safe. My initial anxiety was gone. I could not wait to tell her about the work I was doing at the university and that I was so excited about studying and learning. She could not believe that I was still in school after all these years. She said “I didn’t expect that from you, Lessard.”

We laughed often during that initial conversation, sitting at a little table sipping on coffee and talking about life. Perhaps the laughing was because of our nervousness or maybe it was just time to look at life and the different stories we have created through our chosen paths and laugh. Sometimes it feels like this is all we can do. I sensed that she was uneasy talking to me at the very beginning, maybe because I was her old teacher and, as I have come to know, it is never “cool” to be sitting in public with your old teacher. As time passed in the flow of conversation, I explained the work that I was doing and the importance of asking young people about their school stories instead of forming opinions based on what adults think. After my explanation she signed the ethics paperwork to agree to participate and to share her school stories with me.

I was very careful in these early beginnings of reconnection to respect my role and how it might feel talking to a former teacher about leaving school and the fact that I heard stories and speculation that no doubt added to her ambivalence. I often told her during the course of our first conversation that “what was said at the table stays at the table,” and with these few words she took me on a journey of learning that lasted over several cups of coffee. “Straight black coffee, no sugar, Lessard” is how she said it.

During our conversations, one of the choices I made was to put the tape recorder away and jot down notes as we talked. I recalled the conversations through the notes and

diagrams I made during our conversations. One of the main points I often brought up was that I was not there to judge any past decisions made. I was no longer her teacher. When we talked we often started in the present and then wove our way backwards in time. We reconnected with what was new in life and how everyone in her family circle was getting along. She talked about the future often and what she would like to do. She told me that she was inhibited by the stresses and responsibilities of life. She used the word “busy” often when talking about the present.

She had been working at a local retail store as a manager but her dream was to go to school to be a hair dresser. She said that this was one of the areas where not graduating hurt her opportunities. She reminded me that she was only two courses shy of graduating with only her Social Studies and English (pure) credits left to complete. I remembered that she had left school with approximately 1 month to go in the academic year. She also talked about how much she enjoyed working with kids, and that she had, in the past, worked at a local daycare. Her work with children brought her a great deal of joy and I could see this in the way that she told me this story. From this conversation, she began to share parts of her own family stories.

Family and Life – Difficult Paths to Negotiate

Leanne talked with fondness about her little brother, one of five brothers in her family. She spoke about their relationship and how “he used to cry when she would go to school.” She told me this story of her younger brother for a reason. It is related to some of

her feelings of school and her reasons for “taking a break from it” as she said. The stories of her family are through her words and the few memories I have of them.

As she shared her views of family she often spoke of choices and the need for her to follow her own path in life and make decisions. She explained to me with frustration, “do you know Lessard, that I am not even supposed to hang out with my little brother, because I might be viewed as a bad influence on him.” When she shared these words with me, it was with a feeling of sadness. There was a sense of prolonged silences and a voice that had become lost in this family story. She said her little brother was much like her and they shared a common desire for individual difference and freedom. I wonder if this difference is what ties them together. I wonder what stories of life and school she shared with her little brother as he continues to find his way.

The story shifted to her other family members and with these stories I found out much more about the paths woven and the conflicted worlds that proved very difficult to navigate. Our conversation took us to the past when we talked about her older sister and how I taught her. Leanne told me about her sister and her life in a different province. She talked about her visits there and the new story her sister was creating with a growing family. Leanne spoke about her sister and how her life was focused on getting married right after school, and that this was a different path that she imagined for herself, but very contrary to the story her parents imagined for her.

As Leanne talked about her sister I could see that through distance and time they had drifted apart. Leanne described this feeling and her relationship with her sister as “it is different now, when we talk on the phone, it is way different than what it was.”

However, within the same thought, she told me a different story with different words when she said, “when she left a part of me left and from that moment I had to build my own path. I believe in the Creator and I believe that there is a reason for everything and that he has a path for me but it is one that is different than what is expected of me.” These words of wisdom showed me a different side of Leanne that I had not known. I was listening to a person who had thought often about life and continued to reflect on her role and influence on the family. She has had to think deeply about what to do when her path conflicts with that of the family stories being lived out around her.

Leanne continued to create a picture for me through the sharing of stories. Because of her willingness to share, I also began to talk about the past. I spoke about trying to fit in and find my way in a different place with conservative parents. I told stories of growing up and being different than my siblings. We shared many stories during that afternoon, we also had many good laughs thinking of the memories that made up our pasts. I had never talked with Leanne about life and its challenges. I was getting to know her for the first time. There were many stories that I did not consider. There are many conversations that I do not have with my students. Perhaps it is due to time limitations or boundaries. Maybe it’s because I forget to share the small stories of wisdom that could relate to a young person trying to find their way. I wonder what would happen if I opened up more spaces for conversation with students. I wonder what the reaction would be.

As I shared stories with Leanne I tried to take the pressure off her telling me too much, or inquiring too deeply into a subject that was filled with mixed emotions. I told a

story about my dad and we continued to laugh because it involved lessons learned the hard way and the difficulties in talking to parents about life, rules, and structures. After I shared a story about my dad, she continued to tell me more stories of her family. Leanne told me about what it means to live with silences and the importance of being able to talk with your kids. She continued to explain to me that it was

awkward to talk to my dad, I don't know the last time we talked even though we live in the same house. We don't have conversations. He does not want to know or hear about my life. I just pay my rent and live my life.

She explained to me how she could sit at a kitchen table and they could be the only two people at the table and there would be complete silence. This story of the kitchen table formed a distinct image in my mind and I wondered what caused these silences, and how will I manage conversations as my little daughter continues to grow. I wondered if the school encouraged silences by creating a story of Leanne, without her voice. I am thinking of that kitchen table and the air of silence that surrounded that place. I am imagining all the stories that could have been shared.

The time and the conversation flowed. It had become so easy and comfortable to talk with this former student. She amazed me with her stories of life. I asked her how her mom is in relation to her school story and the new life Leanne was constructing for herself. She told me about her mom through stories of sharing, sports, and conflicting world views. Through the stories she explained to me, "My mom loves me, it's a different kind of love, she worries so much about me and she often cries when talking to me which impacts how much I want to tell her about my life, it's difficult." She shared

stories of her mom when she was younger trying to figure her life out, and said that her mom understands: “She has picked me up late at night when I needed her and didn’t get on me about it. She understands but worries too much about me.”

Our conversation always moved through the different realms of life. It moved backward through time, stopped at the present, and moved to the future. I asked her about basketball, a question that I wanted to ask all along but was scared to ask because I didn’t want to focus on the past. Through this question the future became the focus. She told me that she had not played basketball for a long time. She said “life was too busy and 20 feels old.”

We talked about stress and how it was important to take time for yourself. I told her that I didn’t have much life advice, but I did know that people need to find time to do the things they love; it’s balancing. I then asked her about her vision for the future and what, if anything, she could see. We laughed alongside each other many times through these stories that we shared about life. She told me that in the future when she has kids, she doesn’t want them to hide anything. “They can talk to me about anything, I will teach them about control and responsibility and communicate with my kids always.” The importance of communication was a thread that wove its way throughout our conversation.

As our conversation came to a close, I brought out of my book bag a small narrative account that I had written about Leanne prior to our meeting. I wrote the narrative to help me remember; to help me form a clearer picture in my mind. I read the account of my memories of her as a basketball player and student at the high school. I

wrote what I remembered about her and told her how happy I was that I could share some stories with her and reconnect after such a long period of time. After I read my story there was silence and quiet thoughts on both sides about times past, the present, and the uncertainties of the future. I told her, as we continued to have conversations, the stories would change and we would develop them together, co-construct school and life stories. At this time we both packed up our belongings and walked to the entrance of the coffee shop. Symbolic of our first meeting we decided that it was best to go separate ways. After all, I do realize the social stigma of walking in the mall with your old teacher, it's still not cool. Until next time, Leanne.

In-between Time (What Does Silence Mean?)

When I sat down at the computer days after my initial conversation with Leanne, numerous thoughts crossed my mind. I tried to capture the feelings that surfaced and the complexity of the school and life story that existed. I wanted to discuss the text and my writing with Leanne, in order to get feedback on how I was hearing her story. However, I was met with silence. We initially set another time to meet but narrowly missed each other. I remember waiting at the coffee shop long past the time that we were supposed to connect, wondering if these conversations were too difficult. Maybe they were too fresh in her mind to continue. I tried many times in the following weeks but, once again, I could not contact Leanne to confirm a date to meet. I left messages hoping that she was doing well, and wishing that she would call me back. I can still remember feeling as if opening the conversational relationship had somehow caused her to disconnect and to

withdraw through avoidance, leaving a gap that I felt I needed to help heal. These were the thoughts that crossed my mind during these days of silence. I finally decided I should just leave things alone, move on and let her be. Obviously this was too difficult of a conversation for her to navigate at this time in life.

A few days later all my previous thoughts were pushed to the side through a simple text message sent to my phone. I woke up to the buzzing of my cell phone and a new text message had arrived. It was from Leanne. She told me to get a hold of her, that there was a lot going on in her life, and that this was why she had not returned my messages. She needed space. Life had thrown out a new set of challenges in her relationship with her boyfriend. She had lost her job as a manager at a local retail outlet. The message was clear and simple: “Let’s get a coffee and talk.”

It is funny how we sometimes think that we are offending people, that our messages are not getting through, and we lose confidence with the conversational relationship we are engaged in. I had questioned if I opened up difficult areas and whether or not I should leave her alone. The conversation was not the issue. The life challenges caused the conversations to take a secondary role. I was relieved and we set up our next appointment at the same coffee shop with two more large coffees between us as we entered a new phase of sharing.

Listening to Silent Spaces and the In-between Stories – Feb. 27 1:30 p.m.

As Leanne approached the table, the awkwardness of our initial meeting was gone. We greeted each other with a customary high five and a familiar laugh. She looked

different. Her hair was dyed jet black. There was a good feeling as we sat with cups of coffee ready to begin where we left off many weeks earlier. Leanne explained to me at the beginning of this conversation that she felt so bad about not getting back to me. She assured me that it was not my fault but that she had needed space because life had been very difficult in the past few weeks. She told of her struggles in her relationship and her job, which impacted her life. The stress caused her to recoil in silence, not wanting to see or hear from anyone. She tried to develop strength for the challenges that she faced. At this point in the conversation I decided the tape recorder would, once again, be put to the side. It remained tucked in my book bag, away from this conversation. My job was to listen and be there in that moment with no distractions to inhibit her need to express confusing circumstances.

Once again stories of basketball enter my thoughts as I typed about this experience and the shared stories of school and life. In many ways it feels like I am returning to the basketball sidelines and that the story we are sharing is in the silences of a time-out where the coach is diagramming a play on the whiteboard, trying to get more out of the players as the game moves to its half-way point. I can still see Leanne sitting on the bench and her eyes are fixed on the words of the coach. Silence prevails and careful reflection on how this game must be played is considered. I wonder, as I type this, if Leanne ever gets time to sit in silence and reflect, ponder, and act on the advice that is carefully detailed on that whiteboard. I often think of basketball as I consider Leanne's stories of school and how her stories of school are woven into her current life. The past experiences will always be in these present stories.

These images of basketball stay with me as I reflect on the second conversation. It moved around from topic to topic, ranging from stories of creation and the realm of spirituality, to stories of identity and the challenges of young people in school trying to fit into the social circles that exist. Leanne asked many questions during this afternoon of coffee and conversation. We continued to laugh often during the sharing of stories of growing up, and thought about the small lessons in the stories. I like to think we were learning from each other about what life was like in two different places and time periods; urban/rural, male/female but also how sports played significant roles in how we each viewed the world around us and tried to make meaning for ourselves.

The conversation moved in different directions, first starting at school and then flaring off in a new direction based on the challenges that life had created in the moment for Leanne. Once school and that part of the story was put to the side, life and its harsh realities set in and pressures such as earning money, navigating jobs, and finding balance in a busy world became dominant threads. The conversation topics and tone were much different than the initial meeting. This conversation offered an opportunity to express and release frustrations. Perhaps this conversation was an attempt to assign meaning to what was going on around her. During this second conversation that lasted throughout the afternoon hours and numerous cups of coffee, I listened carefully and did my best to respect the words and the direction of the conversation based on what she needed. I thought as I listened the stories of school would eventually emerge.

Bad Things Happen to Good People

Many words and moments shared on this day help me in my thinking and my respect for her stories. Leanne's words on this day stayed with me long past the conversation. They are still alive in my mind. I remember as she looked across the table and humbly asked,

Sean, what do you think? Do you believe that if you do good that good things will happen to you? Because, I don't feel this way. I think bad things happen to good people all the time. It just doesn't seem fair. What do you think?

All I could offer to Leanne on this day, was that "Yes I think bad things happen all around." I continued by saying, "It's sad that they impact the goodness in people who don't deserve it, but we need to try to find ways to create new stories and not let the bad ones become our only story." I did not want to offer old teacher advice and I wanted to stay away from the hallway clichés with which I sometimes met students. This conversation was beyond that old story and Leanne needed me to be something different on this day. What I now know from this conversation is that I don't always have to provide an answer. I simply needed to listen to the words and the silent spaces that surrounded that coffee place conversation.

Sharing Teachings from Another Place . . .

Leanne talked about life and how she despised control but lately she had let life take control over her. She explained this to me through her love of sports and basketball and that her need to work dictated the amount she could play. Time constraints limited

her freedom. Leanne expressed her love of freedom and described it by talking about going for a ride on a motorcycle and “just driving and letting my thoughts go.” Leanne talked of freedom and how she desired it, but her choice of leaving school had dictated her current path and the amount of choice that was available.

We talked about freedom for a long time on this day. I wondered how to respond to her and I found myself drawing a picture for her of a medicine wheel. This was a teaching that a Cree Elder had passed on to me. Although Leanne and I didn’t share the same cultural path, we looked at the medicine wheel teachings and reflected on where we were situated within it. We drew this out together slowly and looked at each section of the medicine wheel. We looked at the importance of freedom, respect, balance, and how they developed over the life span. We looked at the medicine wheel and talked about the past, the present, and the future and how they are all connected and shape the paths that we are creating. Through this conversation, I asked Leanne about school and what school was like. Did she always love freedom? Was she always good at sports? These were questions that came to my mind as I asked her to write down on a piece of paper the names of her siblings and the schools that she attended.

Stories of School

She scrawled down the names of her family members from oldest to youngest and told me little stories about them in the process. She also wrote out the names of schools that she attended. She pointed with her pen and tapped the paper, circling a school’s name as she shared her junior high experience. She explained that this was where she felt

the need to run opposite to what was going on. She did not always feel comfortable with the teachings and directions of her classes. They were different than what she wanted. I wondered about what her picture of school would have looked like.

Leanne talked in great detail about her early school years and often described them as nothing out of the ordinary, “just a regular kid going to school.” Once again I wondered why she pointed out that junior high school experience and her memory of it. She explained to me that she attended a local Kindergarten in her neighbourhood and then she went to a Christian school from Grades 1 to 9. Leanne told me the only thing she really remembered about the past was the sports stories. She reminded me that this was the time in her life when she first learned to play basketball.

She talked about this school of the past with feelings that are connected to how she is currently feeling. I tried to inquire into this space and asked her if she felt negatively about this school while she attended or just now as she reflects on it. She described her junior high experience and the students with whom she attended school in the following way,

It’s not like we were oppressed, or maybe we were . . . (laughs) it’s just that we (students) didn’t have the experience of other kids, and many of us went counter to what we were always told to do, or told to act, we just went a little crazy when we were thrown into a big high school and given all these choices, we didn’t know how to manage this, it’s difficult going to high school.

As I listened to Leanne on this day I wondered why it took so long for us to have this conversation. I have known her for many years and through all this time our

conversations had been largely on the surface. I wondered if we would be able to have this conversation if we could go back in time. Does the school landscape inhibit the need or the possibility to share? Is there something about that high school space that defines roles and makes it difficult to have a conversation that is needed? When I think of my role as a high school teacher I often forget about the critical development that takes place in elementary and junior high. My relationships with many students are often only sporadic interactions that take place in the hallway, changing only if I get an opportunity to connect through the classroom or extracurricular activities. These are the quick snapshots I see of many students. I only learn a small part of their stories in that high school space.

The conversation moved closer to the present and an area with which I was more familiar, the high school years. From the outside, it seemed Leanne had many positive experiences at this time in her life. I wondered if she felt the same way.

High school must be like a blur. It must be like that point guard story, a basketball game. How it's managed dictates success. The light bulbs on the score clock create numbers telling fans who is winning and how much time is left in the game. The coach dictates to the players how the game will be played based on what is going on in that game during that moment or whether the team is winning or losing. Success in this game is so narrowly defined and the choices made within can shape the outcome. What does a player do when the game doesn't turn out the way it was supposed to? How do you recreate the story that takes place on the court? What happens when a player makes a mistake? Is there opportunity for redemption or does the game move on? I think of school

stories and not all of them have happy endings. Some students have skills to navigate. They have an ability to negotiate the changes in their story. I am thinking of the students who don't always know the right answers and desperately feel like they need to get away from that school space. I am thinking they are just not interested in playing the game at the moment but this does not mean they are not interested in the end result.

I wonder, as I type this, what Leanne will think when we read this account together. Does this analogy fit the story that she told me? Does it make sense to her as she reflects on her school story? I wonder what her new path will look like and if she will get back to playing the game she loves. What type of story will she create as she moves forward in time?

Many teachers knew Leanne quite well because of her presence in the hallway, involvement in sports, and high level of success in academics. However, she felt that she did not have a close relationship at school with her teachers. She said often during this part of the conversation that she felt that it was like "going through the motions, I can't really remember the classes at all or the teachers' names who taught me." She said that she really only "remembers the sports"; teachers "don't go that deep." When they talked to her they seemed only concerned about the subjects they taught.

We talked about the process of going through Grades 10 to 12 and Leanne told me that "there is so much more to me than what people think." She explained how she viewed herself as different than many of her teammates in school, that she loved to paint, and play guitar. She asked me if I remembered that. I replied yes and I recalled being surprised to see her board the bus with a guitar in hand as we prepared for a week-long

school field trip. I wasn't shocked because I didn't think she could play guitar; it's just that she was the only member of the basketball team that went in her own direction. Many of the players often stuck together in classes and did not venture that far away from the company of each other. Leanne reminded me during this conversation about how much grief she took from the other members of the team because she missed basketball games to attend the guitar field trip. This was an extremely unpopular choice in the eyes of her teammates. I wondered about the guitar story she was creating for herself and how it ran contrary to the dominant team story that existed in her life. I wondered if she still played the guitar and if she played to create her own individual story, one that was different than the collective.

Our conversation about high school often led to a discussion about the two courses she needed to complete her graduation requirements. She felt that she could easily challenge these tests if given another opportunity. She talked about the final year of school and how it shifted for her and that it became tense between her and her parents based on the decisions she was making. Leanne explained, "Lessard, I wanted freedom to date who I wanted to, and also to not have such strict rules telling me who I could hang out with." She told me that she just wanted to be like the other girls and not have so many restrictions. She wanted to be her own person, different than what her family wanted. She reminded me of the series of events that led to her leaving school. She told me that in her Grade 12 year she met a guy that she really liked but who was different than who her parents approved of. The differences led to tensions that were difficult to negotiate.

Leanne continued to tell me the story. She said, “I just could not take the pressure any more, I felt completely stressed out with the decisions that I had to make.” She described the extreme stress she was under, “I had no one to talk too that could understand.” She said that at home there was stress about her choices but that she wasn’t doing anything that wrong; it was just different than what the expectation was. She said, “I couldn’t handle it, I needed to get away, and the stress at school and home was too difficult to handle. I needed to get away from life, from everything.” I asked her many questions during this part of the conversation and asked her if there was something different the school could have done.

Her response helps me to understand as I move forward as an educator. She said, “Lessard, even you, we just talked about the sports. You never asked me too much about the other things, everybody had a business attitude.” I looked at her and responded with a simple, “I know, and I am sorry.” I told her how I looked at the story from one point of view, that I only ever saw her in the hallway, and that one day we were talking and the next day she was gone. “I had no way to track you down or ask if I could help.” We talked about this moment, reflecting on that school year. I told her how I felt about the situation and that I was shocked that she “dropped out” and she corrected me, “I didn’t drop out. I took a break. Dropping out is negative, it’s different.” We talked for a long time about her high school stories and she explained to me the importance of having someone to talk to in all parts of life. I wonder about the stories that we have shared and how the many avenues in her life had expectations and composed who she was or who

she was expected to be. I wonder if her decision to take a break from school is a response to the numerous voices that were telling her who we wanted her to be.

At this moment Leanne went through the different areas in her life from her family, the church, and school and explained how often the “people don’t really want to hear the truth, they want to hear things that make them feel good.” She explained that she is the first person in her family “to go on a different life path” and that it is difficult being by herself. She said to me the idea of a “lone wolf,” a title I gave her at the beginning of our conversations, is a good way of looking at her because she is by herself in the decisions that she makes. She said “that there are so many people in the world that are not real...I have problems with people who make judgments and that cause me to want to remain silent.” As I look at our conversations, different feelings come to mind. I look at the roles of schools and most importantly my role as a teacher who can make a difference and wonder how I will adapt. I wonder how I will learn from this story. I wonder when I return to the classroom if this story of school will change me, if it will help me to listen more closely to the stories that are taking place all around me.

I look at Leanne as the point guard of this story and I am thinking of her story often these days. I am thinking about how much her story is helping me as I continue to learn. I recently had an opportunity to step back on the basketball court with Leanne and some of her friends. She reminded me that I owed her a game for helping me out with my project. I am happy to write that since we started our conversations she has returned to the basketball court and has started to play again, returning to a game she loves but one that will not define who she is as a person. I played basketball with these former students

for a good part of the evening and, as I slowly made my way up and down the court, I was laughing inside thinking of the small journey that we have been on and how time passes me by. I am thinking of all the good things and wondering and hoping that the happiness in a casual basketball game can be transferred to the other parts in life.

Thank you, Leanne, for teaching me!

Chapter 6

Conversational Spaces Conclusion

Resonant Threads

The early school leaving project team—Clandinin, Steeves, Li, Mickelson, Buck, Pearce, Caine, Lessard, Desrochers, Stewart, and Huber—initially found 15 resonant threads in the 19 narrative accounts. Many points intersected and overlapped and we eventually identified six resonant threads:

1. Conversational spaces
2. Relationships
3. Identities
4. Complexities over time
5. Responsibilities
6. Cultural, social, and institutional narratives

The threads from the narrative accounts have helped me to think about the complexity of the phenomenon of early school leaving. As a teacher and aboriginal consultant, I am able to use these threads to attend to the stories of youths who are currently in school. The threads also guide my attention working under current school practices and policies and direct my thoughts on how I can begin to change them.

I can find resonance in all six threads; however, when I attend closely to the experiences of Skye, Jules, and Leanne, the thread of conversational spaces is what speaks to me and helps me to understand more deeply. I think about the classes I have taught and the importance of getting to a deeper place with students that moves beyond

the mandated curriculum. In doing so, I can more clearly understand and compose places where we can learn together, where we can co-compose a curriculum of lives for each student (Clandinin et al., 2006). Conversational spaces are difficult to locate on school landscapes. Conversational spaces involve going to a deeper place, space uninhibited by time or mandated curriculum and space co-created by listening and moving together. I am thinking of the missed conversations: opportunities missed because I was too busy paying attention to the rhythms of teaching dictated by bells, margins, timelines, and outcomes. I believe that by reflecting on what a conversational space means, I can shift my teaching practice.

Creating Conversational Spaces: July 2009

As my time winds down on my 1-year sabbatical, I am starting to think about reentering the classroom space. I know many of my thoughts and practices were impacted in this past year by conversations shared with Skye, Jules, and Leanne, three youths I had previously known. We had the opportunity to reconnect and look back at school from a different vantage point. Outside of the place and time of school, we learned to talk and share in a new way. Our conversations of life and school involved numerous feelings as we retraced our school stories together, starting from the beginning and moving to the moments where school became a place to leave. The leaving part of school in the stories I listened to is not one significant act that happens or a point in time that can be analyzed. The stories of life and school are constantly moving, shifting, and navigating, trying to maintain a pace that allows for staying. I am thinking about the stories of the youths and

the places I have connected with them, the personal journeys we have walked together in the sharing of these school stories. I look at this time and recognize that our relationships are different now.

My feelings have shifted, too, and I am more aware of the power of sharing and the deep impact it can have on healing. Time has been important because we have looked back together through the role of teacher and student, and now that we are outside the school space, we have bridged the difficult conversations and created a safe place to look backwards and forward together. This space is far different from the one defined by classroom walls and hourly, daily, weekly, yearly cycles of school time.

The stories of school have been resting in the youths, which they have been unable to share either in school or out of school places. Many of the stories that I felt to be most relevant were often not most relevant to them. The pictures I had of their stories were much different than the ones passed on to me during our telling and retelling through the narrative inquiry. What I could see through my lens as a teacher was very narrow. The stories that were important for the youths in many cases could not be told within those narrowly defined classroom spaces.

Looking back, I wonder what would have happened if the landscape had shifted and had become more open to hearing the stories of the youths I knew or thought I knew. Looking forward, I wonder how am I going to hear the stories of youths as I re-enter the school spaces. Prior to the research I thought I knew the participants, and I did know parts, fragments of who they were, fragments that were visible to my narrowly defined teacher viewpoint. Our relationships have shifted because of the experiences of sharing

the stories of school leaving. I have looked at their stories in many ways and tried to understand if there was something different I could have personally done as a teacher, coach, or mentor to interrupt their stories of leaving.

I wonder how I could not see some of the stories as I walked Jules and her friends home long after the gym was closed. I wonder with Skye why I did not consider identity and the importance of creating safe spaces to talk about the traditions that sustain families. I think about Leanne and how I could not see past the dominant thread of sports and success and see the individual within the team. I am continuing to learn from the stories I have heard.

I talked to the parents of the participants many times as I came to know their children in different ways. I can begin to see how my school role impacted the type of stories that could be shared. The families had to protect the lives they were living; it became surviving in their own way. Surviving looked different for each family, coming in the form of hidden stories from the past, cultural stories difficult to share or spiritual narratives difficult to negotiate within the school spaces. I think about the spaces—the gym, the hallways, the classrooms—and I am trying to imagine how I can create conversations that open the spaces and help in the nurturing of the spirit that exists within the students and families. Jules had told me, in a mother's words, "I think all parents' dream is to see their kids graduate, to see them succeed." I think of these words and hope that through the project I can begin to hear the parents' and youths' voices more clearly as they try to realize their dreams. I am hoping that when life presents challenges for

young people and their families that schools and myself as a teacher can create spaces for staying.

The stories I have been a part of have made me realize I need to open up the uncomfortable spaces that exist between teacher and student and learn to walk alongside the youths as they create their future. I am responsible for far more than the mandated curriculum that exists in textbooks. I need to continue to become a listener and observer and identify paths to help students and parents navigate the pressures of life and school. I put life ahead of school because of what one parent told me when we talked about the impact of leaving school on his family. I believe his words can teach, and the lesson for me is to listen and open up the spaces for stories. He said,

Sean, I think I have a way of making my kids leave school before graduation. I don't mean to do it, it just happens that way. You see, no one in our family has graduated, and we didn't need the schools to help us find our way. When I see my little daughter hurting inside, her spirit being impacted in a bad way, in a negative way, I don't think at this time that she needs to be in school. I don't think that she will learn anything because her heart is hurting and this impacts her mind, so why should she be at school at this time. It is my job to go and get her and help her to get her spirit back, to help her get healthy again. After that we will think about school.

Shifting Forward: June 2010

The narrative accounts provide opportunities for reflection, to look back over time by listening to the voices of youth who have left school before graduation. I think of the youths' stories differently when I now walk school hallways in my job as an aboriginal consultant. The stories resonate with me when I work with kindergarten students at the beginning of their schooling journeys. The stories help me to think and observe in a different way, from within a different plotline of what it means to compose a life. The stories of youth encourage me as I work with a local high school, trying to move forward for change. I know the stories continue to shift me and help me to see beyond the routine that teaching sometimes becomes. The delivery of a mandated curriculum and the policies that create barriers for youth are areas that I am beginning to question, and I can no longer remain silent. I feel that if I had listened more carefully or thought more deeply, I could have interrupted the path that many of my former students took, a path of leaving or exiting school before graduation. A closed door, an empty seat. I know that youths make choices but I also think that schools make choices, and we in schools have opportunities to make a difference. But sometimes I am constrained by the history of a policy that does not always make sense, or when I endeavour to attend to a life that does not match what I have lived, experienced, or come to know as a teacher. I have studied at the university and been provided opportunities that may look far different from those that exist for our students. I need to remember that youths come from a place and bring with them many experiences, and my job as a teacher is to listen and imagine what those places and experiences might look like. The stories from youths are driving my current

work, and they have pushed me to continue my studies at the university. In addition, they are changing the story for my family and my community.

My forward looking story shifted on Monday, June 29, 2010, when I asked my friend and Elder Bob Cardinal to become a part of our graduation ceremony. The high school I have worked in for the past 9 years has never had a First Nations component in the commencement ceremony. The administration of the school asked me if I thought this would be important, and I wholeheartedly affirmed that it was. The school wanted a drummer. I brought them an Elder. He will drum an honour song and a journey song for all our families, regardless of background. While he drums and walks in with the entire teaching staff in the commencement walk, I am going to be thinking about the students of the past. I believe that the opportunity to learn in this new way will be a great experience for all youths. I am particularly proud because one of the graduates will be introducing his grandfather, Elder Bob Cardinal.

I feel the shift and can see it, as we have had many great accomplishments this past school year. We started an aboriginal advisory council that meets weekly throughout the school year. It is student driven and has grown to 50 members. I have sat down and consulted with the youths, and I continue to listen to and walk alongside them. They call the council the Aboriginal Kings and Queens because, as one of the students put it, he had never felt like this before as a student: "I feel like a king." It is our story for now, and our name and group will evolve as we work together with another Elder who advises us and whom I have hired to work with the youth.

Elder Isabelle and I had previously met two years ago. I felt strongly about Elder Isabelle at our initial meeting. I felt comfortable. In this past school year my principal had asked me if I knew of an Elder who could help us talk and move forward when a colleague passed away. My colleague was a great friend and mentor to me personally and to many of the staff members. I immediately thought about Elder Isabelle. I brought protocol to her and visited explaining the situation, she listened and agreed to help, forever cementing our relationship in a different way and on a different path. As our relationship continued and developed, I asked if we could find a place for her to work alongside the youths. Elder Isabelle has now worked with the school for 6 months and has made a profound impact on staff and students. She teaches us to listen as she sits down with the students and beads with them, prays with them and listens to them. I call it Cooking, Beading, Laughing, and Healing.

I believe it is so important for youths to be heard and to have a place of comfort on the school landscape. It is important that we change directions in schools and respond in different ways. We must trouble the notion of policy that comes out of institutional narratives that do not attend to lives of students and their families.

The work and the stories have provided me with a direction for the next school year; I have been granted a physical place in the school to work with youths, and I will call this place The Four Corners Cafe. I am in the midst of writing a vision for this place created for the school community. I can see the benefit of having a place to meet, gather, discuss, converse, share with youths. My vision for the design is that the space will accommodate families and communities together within the school walls. I want it to be a

place where we can learn together, both culturally and spiritually. I want to build a place where we can sit and have a meal with the outside communities and learn together in and for the education of youth. How can we shift the possible stories for youth without going to that place or creating a place of comfort on school landscapes? I look forward to seeing how this place will look as I think about the future of education in this particular school. I am thinking of these ideas, with stories of the past on my mind and within me. I am thinking with stories; they help me see what I cannot always see. I am trying to think and look in a “sideways” manner. I am hoping that the story of school continues to shift and continues to change for many youths who do not feel a part of it. I am thinking about the stories that have been within me, and as I conclude it seems fitting that I start with the first story I wrote on this thesis journey. I am thinking of you, Miles and Marie.

I Am Thinking of You: Some Words for Miles and Marie

I am thinking of you as I write here at this big university. I am remembering fond times at your house filled with laughter and peacefulness. I remember your gentle smiles and welcoming way as I would knock on the door and say, “It’s Sean!” You’d tell me to come in to your home-place: Eat, sit, visit, get to know us. Our friendship started off formal, school-like, business-like, but as time moved on, you let me into your family’s world. I remember walking your little ones home: JJ, Jenny, Chuck, Johnny, Lionel, and Brandon. I do remember. Marie, I am thinking of you and see how gentle and strong, peaceful you are. I miss you, Marie. I remember you telling me about the kids, how you are taking care of them in your wisdom years, how you are getting tired. I remember. I

remember bringing the kids home when troubles happened at school. You listened to them; you encouraged them to go to school, stay in school, develop, work hard. I remember. I can see you in your house, your place; it was always a place for everyone, a place to come and a place to go. We often shared a meal. I remember this was a good place, your home-place. I heard you kept that old newspaper story about me and the kids; it talked about our place, our ways, and our stories. I heard that old newspaper was in a little shoebox, kept under your bed. Thank you for keeping this; it means so much. I am thinking of you, Marie.

Miles, my friend/dad/grandpa/mooshum/moosum, you were different things to different kids; you wore many hats, played many roles. Miles, I remember your strong hands when you shook my hand and welcomed me to your home-place. Miles, I am thinking of you in many ways and I can see you clear in my mind. I miss you laughing. You brought the gift of humour to this place, and the kids miss you. You shared stories with me and talked to me. You carved out pictures in my mind as I listened to you; you took me there to your moments and told me stories. I listened. You taught me the real way, a good way, about history. You talked to me about going home someday. You told me, my friend, that once Marie was gone, there was no place for you in this big city, and you did as you said. You returned home to your community by the lake, surrounded by trees and familiar people. You returned home to the place of history, a place where your mom and dad once lived. I remember, Miles. You talked to me. Remember that day we were sitting out on the back step. It was warm outside. I can still feel it. The van was in the back, two flat tires and broken down. You told me that once the money comes from

the government from that residential school story, that residential school place, that you would take that money and buy a new van; you would take the family for a trip outside Alberta, to a place the kids rarely see, a different place, a place to look forward, to a new story. You would take them away from here for awhile; those are your words. You helped me to understand. Miles, your stories always stay with me. You told me about that time, when you were a kid, how you had to go to a residential school place. It was by the water, and I picture many trees. You ran from this place many times and they brought you back, always. You told me as you cried. For one man to talk to another through tears is difficult. I am starting to understand this. You shared, and I kept your story safe in my mind, but it shapes me, it helps me to understand to look at things in a different way. This is the real way, not a textbook recounting. Those old stories hurt you as we sat on the back step many times, visiting and sharing. I remember our talks, Miles. The school people wanted to know why, why you don't come to the school for meetings, why can they not get you to come in. You told me, and through me I shared with them a different way of knowing and living. You told me that time; remember, you said you would never walk in a school because it took you to a place of hurt-humiliation that impacted your family. Choices. Legacy. I remember the words you spoke. I know because you told me. I just told the school people in a different way. They listened for the first time. I brought them to you, to your home-place, to a place of comfort where we could talk and they could get to know. We learned to share stories of school a new way, and you taught them, my friend. Miles, you told me about life, about how hard it is. Once Marie's gone, why be here, you said; she kept this place, centered this place, and once she was gone it

changed like you said, the place seemed empty, and her way of being was no longer there. The fridge was closed, the food was different, this place changed. I miss you, Miles. Once Marie was gone, the smile left your face. I was too young to understand this then. I understand better now. I am sorry. Marie helped us all. She was silently strong, the keeper of this home-place.

Shortly after this time, I too moved down the road to a new life in another country, to start my teaching career. I went away to a different place but I returned a year later. I went to your house, the same one I know. I went to see you and the kids, but you were gone; you did as you said you would. Some new family lived there. I remember how I was feeling, and I didn't know where to look. How would I find you? Time continues to pass. You would be happy knowing I found Jenny. Someone saw her walking down the street, a friend of a friend, and then they contacted me. I found her, I phoned her, we talked for a long time, she told me that you went home. I was excited, I wanted to see you; she said it's too late, you missed him, he passed on, back in his home-place. Jenny told me that government cheque, that residential school cheque finally arrived shortly after you left this place. Jenny told me your plan, which shifted, changed; you wanted to buy Marie a nice memorial to honour her final resting place. I am thinking of you, Miles. A part of your story weaves its way through my stories. I am happy I found the kids again. I will come to see your new home-resting place. The kids will show me. I will not lose touch again. We will share good stories of you—helping stories, healing stories—we will laugh again. I am thinking of you, Miles and Marie. I am wishing you peace.

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