

Mental health, the sacred, and embodied wisdom:  
Contemplations on the wholeness and well-being of children

by

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## **Abstract**

Mental health concerns are on the rise in Canada and worldwide. The World Health Organization predicts that by the year 2030 depressive disorders will be the leading cause of the global burden of disease (World Federation for Mental Health, 2012). Eurocentric medical models rooted in modern and post-modern paradigms focus on discourses of health that prioritize physical and mental aspects of being, often disregarding emotional and spiritual aspects altogether. The discourse surrounding mental health in schools shifts by contemplating the pedagogical implications of children's expressions and understandings of wholeness and well-being from a lens that honours spiritual ways of knowing and being.

This study was conducted over an entire school year with a group of ten grade four and five students, honouring the ethic of relationality and ongoing connection essential in carrying out research with children that values their inner wisdom. As an important contribution to the educational literature, five distinct methods (of approaching, making, collecting, analyzing, and expressing data) were made use of (in overlapping ways) while working with the children. The methodology of life writing is drawn upon as a way to share student stories alongside my own and those prevalent in North American society today. The purpose of this research is to offer insight into how we as educators might more comprehensively consider the lives of the students in our midst, valuing them as four-part people—at once physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual beings. The spirit and intent of this study is to provide educators and administrators with theoretical and practical insights on how we might best serve our students as they experience life in its fullness while contributing to a new paradigm in educational research.

This research responds to the question, “What are the pedagogical implications of children’s expressions and understandings of well-being and wholeness?” May we not seek to simplify the answers, but continue to expand the questions.

## Preface

This thesis is an original work by Mandy Krahn. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Title: The Holistic Well-being of Children: A Pedagogical Meditation, ID No. Pro00044276, February 24, 2014.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to Greg, Joey, Jonny, Danae, Caitlin, and Kume. Each of you holds a special place in my heart, and I am consistently inspired by your lives and your stories. Learning from each of you how mental illness and wellness has played a part in making you the beautiful human being you were, are, and will be has called upon me to look into conceptions of well-being at a deeper level. Thank you for being you and for providing a genuine purpose for this quest of mine. I am wiser thanks to sharing life with you, and have learned to listen to stories of all kinds: from the hearts of young and old alike, those steeped in joy and others in sorrow, ones that make me laugh and those that cause tears to come to the eyes. Life is always “both/and”... May the unheard voices find a forum—individually and collectively. I am a witness to your stories as they have become a part of me. I offer this writing to you and those you love, as a gift to make you wonder, ponder, and *be*.

With love,  
Mandy

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*It is right it should be so  
Man was made for Joy & Woe  
And when this we rightly know  
Thro the World we safely go  
Joy & Woe are woven fine  
A Clothing for the soul divine  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine*

(William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1997/1863)

The writing of this dissertation, while often a solitary venture, could not have been done alone. First and foremost, I'd like to thank the wonderful children who participated in my study. Without all ten of you, this work would hold no traction (and would be much less interactive and engaging)! Thank you April, Bobby, Bruce, Chloe, Claudia, Cormac, Eric, Henrick, Steve, and Veronica (all pseudonyms), for being you. Second, to my fellow doctoral students and colleagues at the University of Alberta who cheered me on in various ways, big and small, relating to this adventure firsthand throughout the years: my utmost thanks. You know who you are but I want to draw attention to you nonetheless: Adriana, Antonella, Cat, Flo, Hessen, Iris, Leslie, Michelle, Monica, Ron, Silvia, Tanya, Tracy, and Zahra. Wow. I admire you all so much. Thank you for encouraging me on this journey.

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*Besos,*  
Mandy

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Preface</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<i>Dedication</i> .....	<i>v</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>vi</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	<i>viii</i>
<i>List of Figures</i> .....	<i>xii</i>
<b>PROLOGUE</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING THE STUDY</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Focus of the Study</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Mirror Lake School .....	6
<b>Organization of the Study</b> .....	<b>6</b>
How the Research Story Unfolds .....	8
<b>CHAPTER TWO: COMING TO THIS RESEARCH</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Curriculum Studies: A Playful, Connected and Creative Research Space</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Autobiographical Origins</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Coming to the Research .....	16
<b>Mental Health Concerns: Anxiety, Depression, and Suicide</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Re-Conceptualizing Mental Health.....	27
Understanding Trauma.....	30
Mood Disorders: Facts & Statistics.....	32
<b>Colonialism as Contextualization of the Concerns</b> .....	<b>37</b>
Inner Life.....	41
Sense of Time & Place .....	46
Neoliberal Values .....	48
Faulty School Structure.....	52
<b>Honouring Complexity: Attending to Children as Four-Part People</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: ANIMATED WORLDVIEW</b> .....	<b>57</b>
<b>Spirit: Its Presence in Life and Absence in Research</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>The Way of Wisdom: Research Approach</b> .....	<b>61</b>
The Conscious Pairing of Wisdom Traditions and Life Writing .....	64
Attending to the Sacred .....	66
Living Well with Students.....	69
<b>Way of Research: Imagining the World Differently</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<b>Life Writing: A Way to Express this Research</b> .....	<b>72</b>



<b>Research Paradigms or Worldviews .....</b>	<b>76</b>
Pre-modern Worldview .....	76
Modern Worldview .....	77
Post-modern Worldview .....	77
Animated Worldview .....	78
<b>Situating this Study in the Realm of the Sacred .....</b>	<b>80</b>
Place as Sacred Being .....	83
<b>Moving from the Personal to the Collective.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Embodiment.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>A New Ethic .....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b><i>CHAPTER FOUR: CURRICULUM STUDIES, ANCESTORS, HOLISTIC PEDAGOGY.....</i></b>	<b><i>97</i></b>
<b>Living Holistically: Getting Personal .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Holistic Approaches to Learning: A Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiry .....</b>	<b>98</b>
Loving the Questions .....	99
<b>A Call for Holism.....</b>	<b>101</b>
Disconnected Curricular Content .....	105
Holistic Education or Holistic Pedagogy? .....	108
<b>The Role of Curriculum and Pedagogy .....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>Curricular Ancestors .....</b>	<b>111</b>
Canadian Curricular Community .....	118
<b>In Review.....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b><i>CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH METHODS.....</i></b>	<b><i>125</i></b>
<b>Contextualizing the Research Study.....</b>	<b>128</b>
Site and Process Description .....	129
Self – A Found Poem .....	131
<b>Methods of Approaching Data .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>Methods of Making Data .....</b>	<b>135</b>
“Making Data” Explained .....	139
<b>Methods of Collecting Data .....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>Methods of Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Methods of Data Expression.....</b>	<b>152</b>
<b><i>CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH STORIES .....</i></b>	<b><i>155</i></b>
<b>In the Beginning .....</b>	<b>155</b>
Researcher Reflection: August 17 .....	156
Field Notes: January 14.....	157
<b>Flow of the Research .....</b>	<b>157</b>
Researcher Reflection: January 29 .....	158

<b>Role of the Researcher .....</b>	<b>159</b>
Researcher Reflection: February 26.....	160
Processing – A Found Poem .....	161
<b>Research Stories .....</b>	<b>161</b>
Three Things About Me – A Found Poem.....	163
<b>Just Right .....</b>	<b>164</b>
Researcher Reflection: March 19 .....	167
<b>Self-Awareness.....</b>	<b>168</b>
Field Notes: March 26.....	170
<b>Time and Place .....</b>	<b>175</b>
After School – A Found Poem .....	176
Field Notes: April 30.....	183
<b>The Role of Silence .....</b>	<b>183</b>
Observations About Life – A Found Poem.....	187
<b>Disrupting the Current Structure of Schools .....</b>	<b>188</b>
Embodiment – A Found Poem.....	194
Researcher Reflection .....	196
<b>Wisdom Traditions and Curriculum and Pedagogy .....</b>	<b>196</b>
Family – A Found Poem .....	198
Researcher Reflection: May 21 .....	199
<b>Connections: Family and Friends.....</b>	<b>200</b>
Researcher Reflection .....	202
<b>Health and Wellness.....</b>	<b>203</b>
Life – A Found Poem .....	208
<b>Coming to an End.....</b>	<b>211</b>
Part of Me – A Found Poem.....	218
<b><i>CHAPTER SEVEN: THEORY AND PRACTICE .....</i></b>	<b><i>221</i></b>
<b>Curriculum Commonplaces .....</b>	<b>222</b>
Milieu .....	224
Self-Study.....	226
<b>Personalizing Self-Study and Transformation .....</b>	<b>228</b>
Jumping in with Both Feet: A Rite of Passage.....	228
Transformation Embodied.....	229
<b>Transformation: Inner and Outer .....</b>	<b>232</b>
<b>Veronica’s Transformation – A Found Poem.....</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>Manifestation of the Core Concepts Exemplified in Veronica’s Experience.....</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>Milieu and Self-Study: Commonplace “Containers” to Hold the Central Concerns .....</b>	<b>242</b>
Notions of Time .....	243
Attunement .....	252

Being “Really Real” .....	259
<b>Amplification: What It Means to Be Real.....</b>	<b>263</b>
Connecting with a Sense of Time and Place .....	268
Questioning Neoliberal Values .....	271
Interrupting the Faulty School Structure.....	274
Valuing the Inner Life .....	277
<b>Wholeness: Seeking and Creating Meaning in Life .....</b>	<b>279</b>
<b>Embodied Wisdom .....</b>	<b>282</b>
<b><i>CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPLICATIONS</i> .....</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>How Might We Proceed Pedagogically? .....</b>	<b>288</b>
Honouring Connection .....	293
<b>Understanding the Difficulty.....</b>	<b>294</b>
Practical Insights for the Classroom Teacher.....	296
<b>The Cycle Begins Anew.....</b>	<b>298</b>
<b><i>REFERENCES</i> .....</b>	<b>300</b>
<b><i>APPENDICES</i>.....</b>	<b>324</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>324</b>
Week-by-week outline of activities.....	324
<b>Appendix B.....</b>	<b>327</b>
Semi-structured Interview Questions for pre-adolescent research participants .....	327
<b>Appendix C .....</b>	<b>328</b>
Stages of Guided Imagery .....	328
<b>Appendix D .....</b>	<b>330</b>
Ethical Considerations.....	330
<b>Appendix E.....</b>	<b>333</b>
Parent/Guardian Information Letter and Consent Form .....	333
<b>Appendix F.....</b>	<b>338</b>
Research Assent Form.....	338

## List of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Yoga Balancing Poses</i> .....	164
<i>Figure 2: “Just Right” Postcard 1</i> .....	166
<i>Figure 3: “Just Right” Postcard 2</i> .....	167
<i>Figure 4: “Mindfulness in a Jar” Swirling Emotions</i> .....	170
<i>Figure 5: “Mindfulness in a Jar” Settling Emotions</i> .....	170
<i>Figure 6: Slowing Down - Animal Artwork 1</i> .....	173
<i>Figure 7: Slowing Down - Animal Artwork 2</i> .....	174
<i>Figure 8: Anonymous: “Embarrassed” Emotion Drawing</i> .....	181
<i>Figure 9: Steve: Untitled Emotion Drawing A</i> .....	181
<i>Figure 10: Steve: Untitled Emotion Drawing B</i> .....	181
<i>Figure 11: Chloe: Drawings of “Confused” and “Happy”</i> .....	182
<i>Figure 12: Anonymous: “Goofy” Emotion Drawing</i> .....	182
<i>Figure 13: Experiencing Joy in Nature – Artwork &amp; Writing 1</i> .....	186
<i>Figure 14: Experiencing Joy in Nature – Artwork &amp; Writing 2</i> .....	186
<i>Figure 15: Experiencing Joy in Nature – Artwork &amp; Writing 3</i> .....	188
<i>Figure 16: Mandala Art Experimentation</i> .....	191
<i>Figure 17: Mandala Art 1</i> .....	192
<i>Figure 18: Mandala Art 2</i> .....	192
<i>Figure 19: Mandala Art 3</i> .....	193
<i>Figure 20: Mandala Art 4</i> .....	193
<i>Figure 21: Mandala Art 5</i> .....	194
<i>Figure 22: Weekly Art Supplies</i> .....	198
<i>Figure 23: Someone Who Brings Me Joy</i> .....	201
<i>Figure 24: Engaged in Artwork 1</i> .....	202
<i>Figure 25: Engaged in Artwork 2</i> .....	202
<i>Figure 26: Magazine Image and Reflection 1</i> .....	206
<i>Figure 27: Magazine Image and Reflection 2</i> .....	207
<i>Figure 28: Magazine Image and Reflection 3</i> .....	207
<i>Figure 29: Veronica: Drawing of “Sad/Llonely”</i> .....	209
<i>Figure 30: Teamwork Activity – Making and Enjoying Nachos</i> .....	213
<i>Figure 31: Yoga Explorations</i> .....	213
<i>Figure 32: Cormac’s Nature Installation</i> .....	214
<i>Figure 33: Bobby and Steve Exploring in the Woods</i> .....	215
<i>Figure 34: Bobby’s Nature Installation</i> .....	215
<i>Figure 35: April’s Collected Natural Items</i> .....	216
<i>Figure 36: Bruce and Steve’s Nature Installation</i> .....	216
<i>Figure 37: Bobby’s Note to Future Self</i> .....	217

## PROLOGUE

### **Reality – Guatemala City, Guatemala**

*Vultures circle overhead. My sticky skin craves reprieve from the humidity-soaked air. My head itches from the lice that have made their home amongst my curly locks, having traveled the relatively short journey from the scalps of my students to my own during one of our many friendly embraces. My nose catches the god-awful scent from the nearby garbage dump while my hands gather up the basket of teaching supplies for use in the afternoon lessons. I walk through the thick air to a grade four classroom and reflect on the derelict living arrangements of these children as I prepare myself to greet them at the door, once again a new day with expected surprises. Today we are sharing our favourite English words with one another, as I haltingly attempt to explain in broken Spanish. They get to work writing on poster paper in small groups, and after, at my coaching, circle their number one palabra inglés to share aloud. Calls of “Birthday!” “Soccer!” “How are you?” and “Family” are heard at top volume. Then one of the shy girls quietly voices, “Socks-o.” “Pardon me, can you repeat that for us?” I ask. “Otra vez por favor.” She echoes the same sentiment and I wrack my brain for a potential connection that isn’t coming, and falteringly ask if she’s referring to the English word “socks.” For clarification, and to rescue me from my confusion, the child points to her collage of words, highlighting the one that’s written “xoxo.” Oh. I’m blown away by this simple declaration from a bright-eyed young girl. This expression of hugs and kisses is her favourite English word, yet I can’t help but wonder if this understanding extends beyond language.*

### **An Alternate Reality – Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

*I scan my over-filled classroom, looking at all of the 25+ children in the room, each getting settled for the day of learning together. A beautiful yet withdrawn brown-haired boy is tucked away by the window, quietly moving his latest iProduct around to get the best Wi-Fi signal. A desk sits open, for weeks now, as the gentle-faced girl who regularly occupies this space cannot muster the gumption to get out of bed each morning, crippled by anxiety and depression at age twelve. An energetic blue-eyed boy rushes toward me and asks, “Miss, what is ‘sin’? My classmates tell me I’m sinning when I don’t follow the rules but I don’t even know what they mean.” One child checks her blood-sugar levels near the backpacks in the corner. Another starts to cry as she shares about all the fighting going on at home. Yet another checks her hair and make-up in her portable mirror, as I catch evidence of cutting on her wrists while she’s ensuring she looks her best. I take in this scene, take a deep breath, and take my time, wondering what may be the best use of our hours shared at school together today.*

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING THE STUDY

Educators play an important role in the lives of children, as key adults who care about them, encourage them, and teach them. Many young people today are struggling to find their way in the world—a phenomenon that has remained consistent throughout history. While this struggle is not new, the uniqueness of it today lies in the current reality experienced by many North American children: a disconnected existence that does not fully honour the depth and complexity of life and relationships, with self and others. This research is concerned with how it is that children and youth make their way through life in a way that provides them with a sense of well-being, both inside and out. As a pedagogue—a teacher and researcher—I have found myself wondering how to best support our young as they explore what it is like to feel whole while seeking a sense of meaning within their lives. The purpose of this study is to understand how educators might more fully attend to the overall wellness of children. My intention is to share pedagogical contemplations on the wholeness and well-being of children rooted in curriculum studies and in the findings gathered during a yearlong school-based research project.

### **Focus of the Study**

I embarked upon this dissertation research in response to a large concern I was experiencing as an educator. Every year and in every place I taught, it became more and more apparent that students (in greater numbers and at younger ages) were experiencing increased mental health concerns. I could not help but wonder about the factors contributing to their struggles. I recognize that I too am implicated in each of these concerns and seek to attend to this throughout the writing. Broadly stated, we are all living in and with the legacy and consequences of colonialism, defined by Donald (2010) as “an extended process of denying relationship” (“On what terms can we speak?” lecture, 12:15) and experienced as disconnection. Colonialism, thus,

is the root of the problem to be addressed here. This problem—relationship denial—contributes to mental health concerns, and I have found four main sub-problems associated with this overarching disconnect experienced by young people today. They are briefly summarized here and expanded upon in Chapter Two. First, many people (of all ages) seem to have a weak connection to an inner life<sup>1</sup>. This lack of an internal guide or reference point results in being overly directed by the external realm. Second, the current pace of life in North American society is preventing many people from being able to pause and think about how they best wish to proceed in life. Instead many of us move at such a fast pace that our bodies are often dysregulated, as we over-rely on cognition alone to guide us. Third, the neoliberal values that consumer society promotes tend to prioritize fulfillment found in acquiring and doing new and exciting things. Equating “success” and a life of value primarily with capitalist concerns and economic goals leaves an inner void. Fourth, the current dominant school structure in societies impacted by and built upon colonialism is not set up to support holistic ways of being in the world. The focus on particular (and I would argue, limited) ways of knowing and understanding detracts from attending to students as four-part people.

Four-part people is a Cree understanding of humans as being at once physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual creatures. In Cree, this translates as *nehiyawak*, which literally means “four-part people” and infers a notion of being “a real human being” because such people are guided to live as real human beings are meant to live (D. Donald, personal communication, April 10, 2013). We are meant to live as best we can in harmony—with the natural world, with others, with ourselves—while facing life as it is. I recognize that all people are on a journey of

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the “inner life” of research, teaching, and practice is a way of demonstrating the need to look psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally inside oneself for a possible pedagogical response, not only toward the outer world. I was originally oriented to this worldview when enrolled in a class with Dr. Alexandra Fidyk at the University of Alberta titled “The Inner Life & its Significance to Practice, Research & Ethics” in Winter 2012.

becoming. This research holds space for the possibility of transformation, all the while acknowledging that the experience of wellness is not fixed but is in constant flux. In this work, I refer to four-part people as those who embody wholeness and well-being. By connecting with the four parts of ourselves, we are better positioned to live in a harmonious, embodied manner.

These four problems are inextricably linked and tied to the legacy of colonialism. The source of each of the concerns addressed is rooted in relationship denial and in the fact that many students seem to lack a larger perspective of what matters in their own, unique lives. I wonder, then, how might schools be places where these concerns are faced—not with the goal of finding a grandiose, generalizable solution, but with the intention of encouraging students to embark upon a self-study that will support them in making sense of who they are and what matters to them. Living in such a way that honours the four parts of themselves will, in turn, impact their abilities to learn, focus, and be more fully present throughout the school day. Further, it will allow them to live more holistically, as they realize the necessary integration of their health in each of the four realms: mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Throughout much of the educational and mental health research, wellness is generally understood as “the quality or state of being healthy” (Merriam Webster, n.d., “wellness”; see also EPSB (2019) and [albertahealthservices.ca](http://albertahealthservices.ca)) as a whole person, attending to the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of self and echoing the Cree term *nehiyawak*. In this dissertation, the term *wellness* is used interchangeably with the words *wholeness* and *well-being*.

In order to find out more about the concerns outlined above and to ponder their implications for educators, my research led me to a group of grade 4 and 5 students, where we learned and grew alongside one another over the course of a school year. The hope and intention was to support them on their own journeys of growth and individual development, as well as to learn from them how educators can better attend to the needs of each student in our midst.



Together we allowed ourselves the opportunity to try new things, to be vulnerable with ourselves and each other, and to experience enhanced connections by intentionally prioritizing activities and discussions about how to slow down and turn inward in order to be well.

Throughout the research processes that culminated in this dissertation, I carried an index card with my initial research question everywhere I went. It read: “What are the pedagogical implications of children’s expressions and understandings of joy and well-being?” While much of this question continues to resonate, it has become clear that this research is no longer about joy *per se*, but rather that being well requires *both* joy and suffering. In order to be whole and connected, to be true to one’s core being and what it is that allows the inner life its rightful place alongside the outer realm, it is essential to experience a full range of emotions. Leaving the research question with a sole focus on *joy* and wellness would cut off a range of possibilities, whereby one might experience well-being by facing all aspects of themselves. Wholeness comes through this integration, this experiencing fully of that which the entirety of the four-part person presents without trying to stifle it or be defined by it. In working with my research participants, it became clear that I could not focus only on joy and happiness, as this was not their lived reality. In order to experience well-being throughout our time together, we allowed ourselves to feel, to become, to connect with our inner selves in order to try to be whole. These weekly interactions were set up to provide a caring space in which the participants could face this denial of a healthy relationship with themselves brought on by colonialism. Thus, through the process of working with the children, which will be detailed in chapters five and six, my research question had to be revised. It is now best expressed as, “What are the pedagogical implications of children’s expressions and understandings of wholeness and well-being?”

### ***Mirror Lake School***

The data collection portion of this research was completed at Mirror Lake School (a pseudonym), located approximately an hour's drive from Edmonton, Alberta. For the context of this research study, I worked with ten students in particular from one grade 4/5 class over the final four months of a school year, and I worked with the entire classroom informally over the course of the same entire school year prior to the formal start of the project.

Through working with these grade 4 and 5 students in ways that brought creative expression, drama, yoga and guided visualization exercises, artwork, and life writing into play, this research provided participants with opportunities to connect with themselves and with what it is that might bring them ongoing inner wellness, not just fleeting happiness based on external factors. The “data” emerging from the work with the students was later curated into found poems, as a poignant way to consider issues of mental health, embodiment, and the sacred, as the title suggests.

This school was chosen as the site of research due to their divisional focus on student mental health and well-being as part of their year-long mission and vision. When I stated that I wished to conduct the research with students at the Division II level, the grade 4/5 classroom was suggested by the local principal as an appropriate group with which to work. I suspect this was partly because it was a large class with high-energy students, and the classroom teacher would welcome the presence of another educator each week, as well as because it was a group that would be receptive to the sort of arts-based, body-oriented research I had in mind.

### **Organization of the Study**

The organization of this dissertation is purposeful in the sense that it sets out to invite the reader into the process of reading and contemplating as I outline my own process of research,

writing, and ongoing growth. By “ongoing growth,” I mean my own development throughout the research process as I learned to see, accept, and even invite a perspective that welcomes a full spectrum of emotion and experience. In many sections, I share experiences from my own life in order to provide context for what continues to draw me in to this important work. Found poems of student voices are also shared—primarily in Chapter Six—so that readers can hear the voices of the children who participated in my study. The found poems are crafted by me yet fully created out of recorded participant responses from the transcribed interviews or written responses, details of which are explained thoroughly in Chapter Six. I also share excerpts of stories written from my field notes in order to draw readers into the weekly experiences I had while preparing and gathering “data” and working with students throughout a full school year. At times I include “Researcher Reflective Responses,” in which I offer either my own insights regarding the external happenings shared in the research stories or a reflection on the research process as a whole. These responses highlight how the research morphed from being solely about the well-being of children to including their experiences of wellness alongside my own. Each of these pieces seek to provide context and provoke ongoing reflection, rather than make explicit connections between each part.

Rather than acting as a researcher who shows up for a handful of visits to gather data, I became part of children’s lives throughout an entire school year. Beginning in the fall I volunteered in their classroom for one day each week. Once my ethics approval was granted in February, I recruited participants from the class and began the official 12 weeks of the study. In this way, I was able to observe the students throughout the school year, noting ways in which they were able to embody wholeness and where they were stuck in the roles offered to them in modern school settings.

The on-site data collection methods that I employed were four-fold. First, I took detailed field notes throughout my time with the participants. I would write these at the end of each day I spent with the students, noting both what I saw and experienced firsthand as well as the felt sense that stuck with me from various happenings and about various children in the study. Second, we engaged in art-making each week and the artwork created by the students became part of the data set in the form of photographs. Third, I photocopied each participant's creative writing for use in the data analysis stage. Finally, the interview recordings gathered from my discussions with each student were transcribed for use in data analysis and expression.

### ***How the Research Story Unfolds***

The chapters in this dissertation take on an unfolding rhythm that tells the story of this research. Chapter Two, as an introduction to the study, highlights how this topic came to be the focus of my dissertation and why this research into wholeness and well-being matters, particularly relevant given the current state of mental health in children and youth. Chapter Three reveals the research approach that directs the study, focusing on the *what* and the *way* of this work. The *way* is wisdom traditions and the *what* is the voices of children expressed through life writing. These lenses are expanded upon in this chapter yet embodied throughout the entire dissertation. Chapter Three also offers insights into the perspectives of various research paradigms, outlining how an animated worldview is essential when conducting educational research that acknowledges the presence of an inner life. By considering mental health from an animated worldview (that is not stuck in modernity's solution-focused approach or post-modernity's cultural moral relativist stance) (Fidyk, 2016), youth and their current situations might be more wholly understood. Chapter Four discusses holistic approaches to learning,

focusing on the importance of embracing the sacred in educational settings and paying homage to curricular scholars already doing so.

Next, Chapter Five discusses the methods of the research in detail, outlining how I prepared myself in advance for working with the students and then how I went about the details of the study. This section offers a substantial contribution to the educational literature on how pedagogues might proceed in conducting research projects that emerge as an extension of our ways of being in the world. Following this, Chapter Six articulates in detail the research stories, outlining my experience working alongside the participants. Chapter Six ventures into the “findings” that arose from my time at Mirror Lake School, and I share student words, written reflections, and photos of their artwork as examples to highlight the main ideas that resonated with me upon working alongside these children over the course of a school year.

Chapter Seven articulates the link between theory and practice, based on my own making sense of things that happened during the study. Student work is shared and the chapter focuses on a discussion around the problematic colonial legacy of relationship denial and what I learned from my time with students and how this reality affects them. A significant portion of Chapter Seven is spent highlighting in depth the experience of one participant in particular, Veronica, as throughout the course of the school year she personified the possibilities available to individuals if able to face their outward struggles by turning inward for guidance. Finally, Chapter Eight offers concluding thoughts, outlining potential pedagogical implications of this work as well as contemplating how we as educators might thoughtfully attend to the awareness presented through this research.

## CHAPTER TWO: COMING TO THIS RESEARCH

### Curriculum Studies: A Playful, Connected and Creative Research Space

This research is housed within the field of curriculum studies. Early in the reconceptualization movement of the field of curriculum, Schwab (1969) outlined well the “call for a new and extensive pattern of enquiry. The practical requires curriculum study to seek its problems where its problems lie—in the behaviors, misbehaviors, and non-behaviors of its students” (p. 17). This call to maintain the practical applications of curriculum studies resonates with me, as the important work lived daily in classrooms must come to bear on the theory being discussed and implemented. Pinar (2020) describes the field through the lens of the Latin infinitive of curriculum, *currere*. He outlines that “the running of the course—*currere*—occurs through conversation, ongoing dialogical encounter among students and teachers in classrooms but also within oneself in solitude” (p. 51). Curriculum, when understood in this way, “emphasizes the everyday experience of the individual and one’s capacity to learn from that experience” (p. 51). Resting within this complicated curricular conversation, this dissertation explores the connections each of us makes between the emotions we have, the actions we take, and the meaning we make from our experiences. Pinar (2020) states how engaging with curriculum in such a manner can further engage people with the world, as “the educational point of *currere* is, then, intensified engagement with classroom life, supported by the cultivation of a consciousness that remembers the past with an eye on the future while focused on the present” (p. 52). In this way, the study finds a fit in the field of curriculum studies since it is this engagement with life that propels the discussion around how educators might best support students as four-part people.

I was initially drawn to the field of curriculum studies at the end of my Master’s program because of its focus on asking big questions about important issues that mattered to me, such as mental illness and wellness, as well as what might offer meaning and purpose for children. Rather than seeking to nail down a specific response—which can have a limiting effect—curriculum studies invites scholars to ponder larger questions of existence and to wonder about the *why* behind the way things unfold or are organized, particularly within the pedagogical realm. When I read curriculum scholars such as Ted Aoki, Maxine Greene, David Smith, and David Jardine, I was invigorated by realizing that things do not simply have to continue the way they are. Curriculum studies offers a way to explore the major concern of children experiencing a denial of relationship with self and others due to the legacy of colonialism in a way that honours complexities and difficulties without looking for short-sighted solutions.

In the field of education specifically, curriculum studies focuses not on curricular content alone but on what and who schooling and students might be, and how the curriculum-as-lived (and curriculum-as-planned) might contribute to this. Aoki (1986/1991) outlines how the lived curriculum focuses on the “situated world . . . of face-to-face living” with students (p. 160) while “the ministry’s curriculum-as-plan assumes a fiction of sameness throughout the whole province, and that this fiction is possible only by wresting out the unique,” because “generalized knowing is likely disembodied knowing that disavows the living presence of people” (p. 161). I am invigorated by pedagogy that honours the particularity of each student and their life experience, and this research is focused on embodied knowing that considers the individuality of each person in a way that speaks to larger pedagogical concerns.

Young (2018), in writing about the character of contemporary curriculum studies in Canada, outlines how the field “allows for a creative outlet as we engage in discussions about our shared understandings of our human place in the natural world” (p. 83). Curriculum studies

embraces creativity in research and inspires me to tell the stories of my participants as they shed light on larger pedagogical concerns. Housing my research within this field has also encouraged me to focus on particularity throughout my writing, recognizing that “the stories we compose about research are shaped by the people and places within a research place” (Clarke & Hutchinson, 2018, p. 188). These authors make a case for playfulness and vulnerability in research, which is what I sought to do in my project. Curriculum studies invites playfulness, invites connections between all beings, and invites creative ways of knowing and being that are not mired in economic or political pursuits. Jardine (2018) states, “We are being asked, as teachers, as scholars and writers and readers, to not join in the fray of spellbinding, distracting, affliction-arousing, manipulated, real and imagined urgencies. We don’t need urgent cures for urgency” (p. 224). By focusing on that which may be deemed deeply important, rather than only urgent, this work sheds light on large concerns by paying attention to specific examples from the people and places involved in the research.

Considering the role(s) that curriculum and pedagogy have in responding to the holistic needs of the young, a return to the core of this research is appropriate. In this work, holism infers being whole, which connects with the fullness of being that is inherent in living as a four-part-person. Echoing the words of Schubert (2010), “perhaps the central question . . . can be stated simply as: How do I create a life worth living?” (p. 16). Thankfully, this basic question has no simple answer, yet must be grappled with by anyone wishing to experience life as a four-part person. In so doing, one is “cultivating a pedagogy of humanity, which ultimately has implications for schooling and non-school settings” (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010, p. 1). Issues of joy and wellness, and most definitely suffering and illness, are not restricted to the classroom. This research acknowledges that government and corporate interests alone cannot be relied upon to guide children on the journey of “who and how they are becoming” (Schubert,



2010, p. 16), but that education and educators can serve students in this manner. A wise approach to curriculum and pedagogy must reach beyond academic interests to concern itself with addressing the needs of the four-part person. I draw upon this Cree understanding of *nehiyawak* (“four-part people”) in part due to the deep learning I have experienced with Cree Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Reserve as well as the fact that I live on Treaty Six Territory, which stretches from Alberta to Manitoba and includes 50 First Nations, including many Cree peoples.

### **Autobiographical Origins**

Even before I started my doctoral studies, my supervisor encouraged me to pay attention to that which keeps me awake at night. That was not hard for me to pinpoint. If anything, there was *too* much keeping me awake at night. But professionally, this meant focusing on children and what it is that allows them to feel comfortable in their own skin and with their own emotions. And so I write for, from, and to anyone who plays a significant role in the lives of children. Whether a classroom teacher, a school administrator, an academic, a community member, a parent, or anyone interested in holistic well-being, we can all learn from what the children in this research share.

I am connected to this work both professionally and personally. In fact, I have found greater resonance between all aspects of my own life through undertaking this research. I recognize my work as being what Cole and Knowles (2001) describe as a type of “arts-informed inquiry” known as “life history research,” which is “research that seeks to understand the complex relationships between individuals’ lives and the contexts within which their lives are shaped and expressed” (p. 214). While this research was initially focused on the experiences of my participants alone, it gradually became clear that my own story was enmeshed in the process. The excerpt of two of my teaching “realities” shared in the prologue reflect some of pedagogical

concerns I faced throughout this project. In response to this realization, personal stories are shared throughout the chapters to show how I, too, am implicated in all of this. To be implicated demands something from us in response, den Heyer (2009) emphasizes, for us to “make meanings through the context of [our] lives” (p. 27). He recalls how we as educators, as researchers, as adults of influence in the lives of children are inherently “implicated and called upon” (den Heyer, 2009, p. 26). To be called upon, to be implicated in matters of wholeness and well-being in the lives of children holds weight and thus beckons a response. And so, I share stories from my life as a way to articulate my own experience and growth in realizing my fullness as a four-part person.

How, then, did I come to focus on wholeness and well-being as a topic of research? My own development—pedagogically, psychologically, and spiritually—paralleled that of the children in the study and the research itself. My calling to this work emerged over the past fifteen years as a way to heal, for reasons that were initially unbeknownst to me. Faced with personal difficulty, I recognized my need to seek responses to questions of the soul. Early on in this time, I was teaching grades five and six at an urban school in Calgary, Alberta, and noticed that many of my 10- to 12-year-old students struggled with anxiety and depression, and overall blasé attitudes toward life. My questions began to grow beyond what I would focus my teaching on the next day to what might be at play beneath these varied emotions and experiences, and to question some of the deep-seated values upon which our education systems are built. I began seeing how so many of the issues in society today stem from an inability to make life meaningful or recognize a purpose within life: this relationship denial caused by the consequences of colonialism. The simple fact that many people struggle to connect with meaning in their lives, may be out of touch with their inner selves, and do not even know where to start when it comes to seeking wholeness

led me to this work. By *inner self*, I mean a guide found both within and beyond that may offer a compass for how to find one's bearings.

Fast forward a few years, after facing suffering in life tangibly rather than running from it or masking it, I found myself face to face with my own demons, which had been stirred up in my quest for deeper understanding. I worked in Guatemala for a time, teaching English to students whose families are considered to be socioeconomically vulnerable. These students, despite the odds stacked against them, had strong interpersonal relationships and many had a life-giving sense of self and deep personal insight. My experiences in Guatemala and at home in Canada added to my questions of how to best support fellow human beings on their life journeys toward wholeness. In this way, my research is much more concerned with asking difficult questions than in any hope of finding concrete answers. I recognize that what may provide one person with joy, worth and meaning may not offer another the same. Accordingly, this dissertation is not a step-by-step manual outlining "how-to" solutions. Rather, it explores how I came to own my story, to accept myself as I am while encouraging the children in the study to do the same, and provides insights into the processes I undertook in conducting research on wellness in a school setting. The act of writing in such a way echoes Brown's (2010) words: "I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do" (p. xiv).

During a walk with Dwayne Donald, my doctoral supervisor, along the Ottawa River cutting alongside Parliament Hill through the centre of Canada's capital, he encouraged me to write about the process of transformation that has been taking place in my life throughout the span of this research. Truly much growth has rooted in me during the course of my studies, a necessary, synchronous overlap that has allowed me to see how, through *living* this work, the professional and the personal are interwoven realms. Upon sharing how he sees a new confidence in me, what I now recognize as emerging from the embodiment of my work—a depth of

understanding perhaps, maybe even an opening to another way of being—Dr. Donald reminded me of the importance of sharing my story with readers before delving into the full dissertation, so that the weight of this work and its process can be felt. By articulating what well-being and wholeness mean to me, it is my hope that readers are able to make connections to their own life experiences. I experienced the beckoning of a more embodied way of being as we descended down to the river’s edge that afternoon, and felt the responsibility to write about what I have learned: some particularly important links between mental health, embodiment, and the realm of the sacred.

In this work, the term *embodiment* or *embodied wisdom* is used as a way to highlight sensations and experiences that are housed within and experienced in the body. Rather than remaining in the realm of cognition (mental), embodiment implies an emotional component that is viscerally linked with the physical realm. The final piece of the four-part person, the spiritual part, is implied with the use of the term *sacred*. Throughout this work, the concept of the sacred implies a spiritual component, an acknowledgement of a presence at play that is at once within and beyond ourselves, a spiritual witness to our lives.

### ***Coming to the Research***

To provide the reader with context of how I approached this work, I share snippets of my own life experience to offer insight into why I have come to hold particular passions and commitments. At risk of feeling vulnerable in the process, I am learning to embrace Brown’s (2019) approach of being a courageous leader, which requires the removal of defensive armour. In a recent podcast interview, Brown (2019) highlighted findings from her research that demonstrate how fear is not the main barrier to bravery for most people. Rather, people’s propensity for self-protection and armouring up as a way to self-protect proved to be the

fundamental reason why many people do not have the courage to live and lead courageously (“Glassdoor podcast,” 3:48). Throughout my research, I encouraged my student participants to be real, to not be afraid to try new things, to allow their inner voice to be heard, and to be reassured that we were creating a safe place together in order to do so. By *inner voice*, I refer to that which is at once found in each person’s core as well as outwardly in nature and the greater universe—insight that may offer a guide on life’s journey of becoming. If each of us would be conscious of the armour we wear in our daily lives as we interact with children and youth in school settings, it would provide them with lived examples of how to be aware of the ways we each seek to self-protect. When adults are able to interact authentically with those around them in a manner where self-protection is not their primary focus, students may be brave enough to do so as well. Thus the sharing of my own story alongside those of my participants is my way of removing my protective armour—leading the way into an open discussion about childhood mental health and the role of embodied living in that discussion.

At first, I found that the act of removing the word *joy* from the original research question—“What are the pedagogical implications of children’s expressions and understandings of *joy* and well-being?”—felt like a significant loss. For years I had been fixated on how children growing up in societies rooted in colonialist legacies might experience more joy. I wondered why it was lacking; why there were such high rates of anxiety and depression in the young; and what might be done about this. And yet in my own life, the more I sought joy and attempted to “achieve” it, the hollower I felt inside. I now realize that joy was my own hang-up, a personal coping mechanism when it came to facing extraordinary pain in the lives of loved ones, including depression and various forms of mental illness. Thus, I developed a persona that viewed the world masked in joy and happiness as a way to offset the difficulty they were experiencing. This “think positive,” “Everything happens for a reason” mentality I grew up with, backed by positive

psychology<sup>2</sup> as well as Evangelical Christianity, left little room to hold the full spectrum of emotion.

Growing up within a Christian doctrine that taught me many of the values that I continue to appreciate and hold dear, one value that harmed me more than it helped was the concept that light would triumph over darkness, where darkness would no longer be a necessary part of life but was something to be fully overcome (see Isaiah 9:2, 2 Corinthians 4:6, 1 Peter 2:9). I grew up equating light with goodness, joy, and all things pure, holding Philippians 4:8 as my mantra: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (NIV). This mantra left little room for darkness, or for any experience of pain, sorrow, suffering, or difficulty to be felt or expressed in my life. Lost on me was the necessity of having a full spectrum of emotional experiences as an essential part of being whole. Religious references aside, this dichotomy claiming good over bad is heard the world over, and when done unconsciously, can lead to people not recognizing the import of integrating all emotions in their lives in a healthy way, as a full spectrum of self-expression. This problem crosses all generations, often starting when people are young. Through learning about depth psychological<sup>3</sup> principles and embodying a more wisdom-based approach to life, I have come to see darkness and light in less of a battle with one another but rather as existing in tandem with one another, as a way to live in a manner that feels authentic and true. With its “emphasis on the unconscious [that] trains the person to look, then look again,” depth psychology has taught me to pay attention to the

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<sup>2</sup> Positive psychology is a branch of psychology that focuses on happiness as an overarching goal (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011, p. 96) and that attempts to “scientifically explore human potential” ([www.pursuit-of-happiness.org](http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org), n.d., n.p.).

<sup>3</sup> “Depth psychology is a formal discipline of inquiry,” a branch of psychology that acknowledges that “human beings seek meaning in the depths of space – both inner space as well as outer space” (Coppin & Nelson, 2005, p. 12).

“associative language of image, metaphor, myth, and symbol” (Coppin & Nelson, 2005, p. 20).

Depth psychology rests on faith that

At no point can inquiry be unyoked from the complex emotional life of the body. The body and the emotions provide some of the best clues for how to proceed, which include knowing which questions are alive and worth pursuing. (Coppin & Nelson, 2005, p. 19)

Throughout this research, my body and emotions indicated to me that understandings of joy are not complete without recognition of sorrow, suffering, and pain. And so I wonder how we might restore connection with the natural cycles of life, rather than perpetuate imbalances that are felt by people both internally and externally.

In conducting this research alongside my student participants, I found myself caught in the central tension of wanting (them) to focus on that which is “excellent” and “true” (from the Bible verse I memorized while growing up, Philippians 4:8) in their lives, yet realizing the necessity of providing them the opportunity for authentic, full expression. Noting how my own being had such an impact on our time together, I began to recognize (albeit initially unconsciously) how this work was morphing into sharing about both the lives of the students as well as my own life and growth. Through our overlapping experiences, it became evident that I could no longer only tell their stories without unpacking my own, and that wholeness was required to replace joy as the focus of the quest(ion), as it includes loss and sadness. The questions that were alive and worth pursuing were those around the colonial legacy of relationship denial that manifest themselves in the well-being (or lack thereof) in the lives of the very children in front of me.

In schools, many expectations are placed on students to conform to acceptable and limited behavioural and academic standards, often disregarding their full range of emotions and experiences. Yet, I wonder how we as educators might create space within the pedagogical realm

of the classroom for students to safely explore all aspects of themselves in an authentic, nurturing way. During this research, I personally learned to face the aspects of my life that were not “admirable” (as per the above Bible verse), which opened up space for the children in my study to do so as well. I sought to be more whole, and this desire grew into an opportunity for my ten participants to explore the emotions that they had often been encouraged not to express in school, and perhaps elsewhere. In my lived experience, the emphasis of the Philippians 4:8 verse with its focus on thinking about excellence alone was not healthy for my growth and development as a four-part person, as it left me with no way to process experiences and emotions alternative to these ideals, such as anger, jealousy, and worry.

Living life as a four-part person requires self-awareness and an openness to fuller expression: emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally. Living in such a way that trusts how life will unfold rather than planning out every aspect of it has the potential to make each day and every season wildly engaging and unexpected. As an example of this from my own life, I never imagined that I would undertake doctoral studies. Once I was involved in it, I did not expect to be able to share these ideas at conferences around Canada and the world, interacting with scholars with their own unique ideas and approaches to life and living. Through my program I was introduced to Indigenous scholars and a local Cree Elder named Bob Cardinal, whose teachings greatly influenced my life. Also of significance was embarking upon an 800-kilometre trek across Spain on the Camino de Santiago, teaching me the importance of taking things one day—even one step—at a time. I also completed my 200-hour yoga teacher training, which taught me the importance of setting boundaries in order to experience freedom, both on and off my yoga mat. As I conducted this doctoral research with students, I learned of another program offering an intensive post-Masters diploma in Art Therapy, which resonated with me due to the creative work I was doing with children. Thus, I completed coursework and practicum hours in



that creative modality alongside this writing and teaching in a school, becoming a certified psychotherapist. During the course of these studies, I also married and became a mother. I am now working as a school counsellor and assistant principal, every day witnessing how learning is an embodied, sacred act. I share all of this as a way of expressing how I am on my own journey of becoming “really Real,” a concept taken from the children’s story *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1922/2011). (I write more about being “really Real” in Chapter Seven.) All of these experiences have offered insights from different traditions that have taught me wise ways of doing and being in the world, and whose teachings are interwoven throughout this dissertation.

My own life journey exemplifies how living holistically requires each of us to follow the inner voice that beckons us to do something or to settle into our skin in ways that the didactic, intellectual mind alone could not imagine as being valuable. As will be further outlined in an upcoming section, I draw upon various wisdom traditions as the grounding for this study, not by claiming ownership of these unique approaches to life and living but rather by reflecting on how they have each played a role in my own life and development. By wisdom traditions, I refer to ways of understanding that are rooted in particular spiritual perspectives that hold weight in the world. The traditions that have played a role in my life and that I draw upon here include Indigenous perspectives, Christian mysticism, Buddhist and contemplative practices, yogic thought and expression, and Jungian psychology.

In this way I seek to articulate how we as educators might address the legacy of relationship denial at the hands of colonialism. By drawing upon the insights of wisdom traditions and how these ways of being may best support our young today, I address this main root of the problem as well as the four offshoot concerns initially outlined—lack of a connection with an inner life, a society that is too fast-paced, the over-valuing of consumerism, and school systems not structured to address issues of wellness. Before focusing on how and in what ways

wisdom traditions can speak to concerns faced by many children and youth, it is important to gain insight into the many mental health afflictions affecting people in societies experiencing the consequences of colonialism, which includes us all, although to varying degrees and conditions.

### **Mental Health Concerns: Anxiety, Depression, and Suicide**

Mental health and well-being is of critical concern for all humans, regardless of age, race, socio-economic status, or dwelling place. Having a basic understanding of the reach of mental illness is essential to the significance of my work. This section expands upon mental health and a few select disorders, according to our western medical and psychiatric model, in order to highlight “facts and statistics” regarding the possible impact of living in a society that disregards the emotional and spiritual aspects that contribute to living as a complete human being. While my work is concerned with overall well-being in the lives of children (not particularly those who may be diagnosed as having a mental illness), an understanding of how children face their worlds may contribute to deeper engagement with where their disillusionment or apathy may stem and thus how to not let it overtake their lives.

At this juncture, it is helpful to articulate what I mean by mental health, as well as to identify the reasons for employing the term in the title of this work. While I recognize that mental health does not exist as a disparate entity within a holistic worldview, it is the term currently utilized by many organizations in the fields of education and healthcare. To that end, I have chosen to include “mental health” in the title to emphasize the need to pay attention to this aspect of people’s needs as a four-part person. A healthy mental state is defined by the Mood Disorders Society of Canada (2019) as “a balance of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health” (p. 6). Too often, the medical model seems to overemphasize the aspect of *mental* health while disregarding the other parts of a four-part person. There is a strong connection between the

understanding of the four-part person from the Cree worldview—comprised of mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects—and the aforementioned description of a healthy mental state as outlined by the Mood Disorders Society of Canada. My intention through prioritizing mental health in the title alongside “the sacred” and “embodied wisdom” is to draw connections between each of these key pieces of life and living that necessarily contribute toward overall well-being.

Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB), my current employer, recently released a helpful guiding document for educators titled *Mental health literacy for school professionals* (2019). In it, they outline how mental health is a concept that includes a variety of states, ranging on a spectrum from no distress at all to some mental distress to experiencing a mental health problem to having a diagnosable mental illness or disorder (p. 4). Part of the goal of this document is to support school staff in having clarity of language surrounding these states of mental health, and to realize that no matter what state(s) someone might be in, mental health is an umbrella term to describe the various experiences we all have across the composite states. Further, school staff are identified as those who have regular access to children and youth and thus can offer universal supports. The guidelines also outline when it would be helpful for educators to seek specialized personnel and interventions so to better meet unique mental health needs of their students.

It is helpful to consider the nuances between these states, as many students often experience short-term distress in their lives. They can be supported by educators and healthcare practitioners in ways that help them realize the normalcy of these stresses without becoming over- and under-whelmed by them; they can also be taught strategies to cope and work through them. As the EPSB document (2019) outlines, “Everyone experiences mental distress as it is necessary for healthy brain development. Mental distress teaches us how to adapt with change” (p. 5). I find that many young people do not know that health mental development needs short-term, manageable stress to develop neural pathways of success. Educators can model across

curricula what this looks like, aiding them in their healthy development. Another aspect of the mental health spectrum is that of mental health problems, experienced when people's concerns and stresses affect them for a longer period of time, such as a romantic break-up, dissolution of a friendship, parental divorce, or grief resulting from the loss of a loved one. These challenges, too, despite being part of the human condition, need not result in an inability to successfully adapt to change. Again, if educators and healthcare practitioners are trained in social-emotional learning<sup>4</sup> and trauma-sensitive pedagogy,<sup>5</sup> they can readily offer students ways through difficult times. Next on the spectrum are mental illnesses, which are diagnosable medical conditions that may result in a person experiencing "significant, substantial and persistent problems with thoughts, feelings and/or behaviours" (EPSB, 2019, p. 5). People experiencing mental illness maintain their mental health, yet would benefit from targeted and specialized supports and services.

With these understandings at the fore, it becomes possible to understand mental health concerns not only from a Western perspective that focuses on dire statistics and is framed within a static disease-based model, yet also from wisdom-based lenses, including the Cree cosmology outlined below. This perspective recognizes the inherent emptiness in a way of being that does not embrace the interconnecting aspects of life. How might we as educators support students in their self-discovery and journey toward wholeness? Too often, in schools and beyond, children are taught to control their behaviour (external) and focus their energies on learning new

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<sup>4</sup> Social-emotional learning is that which acknowledges the emotional and social dynamics involved in the teaching and learning dynamic, both formal and informal. As Noddings (1984) highlights, people are no less "effective" if they are emotional (p. 143) and education benefits from integration of the emotional domain. The Alberta Education website (<https://www.alberta.ca/social-emotional-learning.aspx>) outlines five interconnected aspects of social-emotional learning, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

<sup>5</sup> Trauma-sensitive pedagogy refers to educational theory and practice that is attentive to the reality that "children often struggle academically as they try to navigate the negative influences of trauma on their cognitive functioning along with the demands of peer, family, and other social relationships" (Richardson, 2016, p. 36). Jennings (2019) outlines how "*trauma-sensitive* . . . refer[s] to educational practices and approaches that are intended to cultivate a safe learning environment and mitigate the impact of trauma symptoms on student learning" (p. 3).

knowledge rather than paying attention to what they are feeling (internal) and exploring the values and attitudes connected to what they face. Engaging the concerns outlined herein can provide students and educators with insight for ways to turn inward with care and attention so to turn outward and live in a more balanced way.

In learning over time from Elder Bob, it is evident that his use of the word *balance* is significantly different from the way current politicians and policy-makers have co-opted the term to promote their ideological interests. Elder Bob emphasizes the importance of balance in Cree cosmology as linked to the circle, which symbolizes life itself: the balanced circle comprises the four-part person, the four guiding directions, the four seasons, and the four sacred medicines. In Cree understandings, balance is linked to healing, as when people find balance within themselves it leads to greater balance in the outer world (B. Cardinal, personal communication, November 22, 2014). He explains that finding balance within can also be taken as a cautionary measure, since imbalance implies that people have been taken away from or gone away from their centre (B. Cardinal, personal communication, September 27, 2014). Nonetheless, it is important to note that it is impossible to “find balance” as though it were an achievable static entity. Rather, Elder Bob gives the example of an eagle in flight, seeking balance dynamically while constantly making slight adjustments to its wings in order to remain in motion the best way possible. For the eagle, as in our lives, balance can be briefly experienced, yet not maintained forever. Following life’s journey or path is known in Cree as *meskanaw*. Elder Bob says that people can start to find their *meskanaw* if they ask themselves three questions: “What am I trying to lift? What am I trying to grow? What am I trying to open?” (B. Cardinal, personal communication, November 8, 2014). These questions provide insight and balance from within as people navigate their life’s *meskanaw*.

In Eastern philosophy, similarly, yet in its own way, the *yin yang* symbol reflects that “life consists of dualities such as light-dark, masculine-feminine, white-black, Sun-Moon, and right-wrong” (Becker, 2004, p. 11). This philosophy reveals the inherent unity found within dualities that make up life—a unity that is fluid and in flux within our subjective experience. In curricular thought, Aoki (1986/2005) describes pedagogical intentionality as a “tensionality that emerges, in part, from indwelling in a zone between” (p. 159). While unity and healthy tensionality are indeed different from balance, it is resonance with these references that I allude to when using the term balance as I learned from Elder Bob. The ongoing struggle of seeking balance is an embodiment of this healthy tensionality.

Elder Bob shared that one of his Elders once told him, “Don’t give people the answers. Give them something to think about” (B. Cardinal, personal communication, October 25, 2014). When someone has something to truly think about, it dwells with them as a four-part person, affecting them mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. In using the terms *internal* and *external realms* in this work, I associate internal dwelling—with something such as a sensation, a feeling, an image—as a necessary part of externally acting. Elder Bob also shared that a key principle in the Cree worldview is that of *wîcêhtowin*, which means “good relations” and “mutuality” (B. Cardinal, personal communication, September 27, 2014). *Wîcêhtowin* is the essential starting point for all decision making. It links to what I mean when I write that one needs to turn inward in order to turn outward in a healthy manner. To live well within our intricately webbed world, it is vital for us to establish good relations within ourselves—our emotions, feelings, desires, fears, imaginings and thoughts—in order to live in mutuality and thus, in good relations with others—our neighbours, fields, fauna, and forests. Living in mutuality spreads further into *wâhkôhtowin*, or extended relations, meaning: “as human beings

we are enmeshed in relations that give us life” (B. Cardinal, personal communication, September 27, 2014). These core Cree understandings are at the heart of this work.

### ***Re-Conceptualizing Mental Health***

Current conversations about mental health in the realms of education and healthcare are based in the language of the Western medical model of health. As this is the dominant frame of reference used today in Alberta’s public schools, in the forthcoming section, I outline this perspective’s mental health measures of youth. Given that healthcare has become interwoven with systems of education, teachers have been mandated to address student social and emotional health as well as mental health (Alberta Education, 2020). Because of this socio-political relationship, teachers and administrators are introduced to mental health from this perspective as well as its assumptions, strategies, and interventions. Unfortunately, this medical model undergirds both psychiatric and psychological approaches whereby mental health is usually pathologized, students are separated from family, culture and place in their diagnoses, and treatment reflects a mind-body split (Fidyk, 2019). Furthermore, this model is not preventative nor does it seek optimal functioning; rather, it is symptom-based and stems from what is wrong, lacking, or deficit. That is, it does not offer means to prevent ill health nor maintain good health.

Healthcare professionals in our schools work with students who require targeted or specialized supports. These professionals draw upon strategies and tools to address wide-ranging mental health issues (including but not limited to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, and suicidal ideation) that exist among our diverse student populations. Mental health therapists, counsellors, psychologists, and social workers within school contexts have been trained in this model to see children and youth as normal or not, healthy or not, and separate from relations, in particular, relations to place and to spirit. In short, the Western medical model has

value for in-school practice when its inherent assumptions are critically understood. Yet when utilized uncritically and in isolation, it falls short. Integration of intercultural perspectives regarding what good health means from diverse worldviews is a necessary add-on so to better meet the needs of current students. Thus, my research offers ways wherein we might learn to bridge the dominant Western model with wisdom traditions, and in particular, the Cree notion of a four-part person. How might understandings of mental health become more comprehensive through culturally-aware trauma-sensitive pedagogy, for example, as well as holistic Indigenous perspectives?

In this vein, the relational practices directing this study (as outlined in chapter 3) offer a new ethic for mental health and wellness in schools. This new ethic extends to school professionals, families, and communities. In timely fashion, this study bridges the two different paradigms outlined. In what follows, I offer the givens of mental health according to the dominant Western perspective, that is, facts and statistics. Then I describe Indigenous ways of knowing, as well as those inherent to wisdom traditions, and integrate the two in a discussion about children and youth wellness.

I propose that a lack of connection between the parts of being a four-part person—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—is a contributing factor in the high rates of mental illness in Canada. The Mood Disorders Society of Canada (2009, 2019) highlights that the “chances of having a mental illness in your lifetime in Canada” are “one in five” (2019, p. 10) and that the “age with the highest rate of depression symptoms” is “under 20 years of age” (2009, p. 3). As of 2019, mental illness is “the leading cause of disability in Canada” (Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2019, p. 10), yet the “percentage of overall health spending allocated to mental health” in Canada is only “7.2%” (p. 13). In particular, “mood and anxiety disorders” are currently “the most common mental illness in Canada and the world” (p. 16). Mental and



physical illness are inextricably linked, as “people with long-term medical conditions are more likely to also have mood disorders and, conversely, people with mood disorders are more likely to develop a medical condition” (p. 26). Further, the “proportion of disability claims in Canada related to mental illness” is “1 in 3” (p. 49). Thus, within school contexts, educators spend more and more time and energy focusing on how to best support students who struggle with mental distress, mental health problems, or mental illness.

In this research, the focus is not merely on the somewhat dismal statistics surrounding mental illness, but rather on what mental health might look like for children. The four major problems that this research seeks to address can all be linked to mental health: lack of a connection with an inner life, the overly fast pace of North American society, skewed neoliberal values that overemphasize economic success and thus in their pursuit lead to the breakdown of community and communal values, and an overarching school system that continues to perpetuate lack of well-being in the young. Likewise, each of these four issues are rooted in the legacy of relationship denial (with self and others) that was brought about due to colonialism.

Unfortunately, some people who work in schools or other adults of influence in the lives of children continue to create and perpetuate mental health problems in students, in part due to the focus on students primarily as academic entities without acknowledging their whole being. In fact, at times school policies and the leaders who enforce them put extensive institutional pressures (such as high-stakes testing, overall academic performance, as well as firm behavioural expectations) on students that these demands take a toll on the mental wellness of children and youth.

### *Pedagogical Attention to Mental Health Needs*

Over the years, it has become concerning for me as an educator that so many children are deeply affected by mental health concerns, either their own or that of a family member. This study thus arose out of a desire to respond to the current lack of *joie de vivre* I saw in my students, as well as in many of my own loved ones. Moving beyond my own experience and into the statistics surrounding mental health, I quickly recognized that the situation is grim. Nonetheless, the focus of this research is more on how many of the young in our midst are experiencing distress and struggle in their lives overall, not particularly highlighting experiences of those with a mental health diagnosis. Of further note is the necessity to pay attention to the vast numbers of students enrolled in our schools who have experienced trauma in their lives, as mental illness is often entangled with trauma. In the past teachers have often sought to focus on the planned curriculum alone, which leaves little room to attend to the personal struggles of students. While I am not advocating for teachers to be therapists, for them to have a base level of understandings of trauma would be beneficial in building connections with students, and knowing when they may need to refer some students for specialized supports. Students benefit from teachers who have an understanding of the four-part person in their pedagogical approaches.

### *Understanding Trauma*

Trauma is experienced when a person faces something so unbearable and intolerable that they experience a rupture or break psychically and cannot integrate this experience into their world. Medical doctor and trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk (2014) explains how traumatic experiences “leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems” (p. 1). In other words, people who have experienced trauma—including many young people in our schools—attempt to live and learn while often

triggered by these body memories that can hijack their ability to be fully present. Van der Kolk (2014) outlines how “trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive” (p. 3). Struggling to feel as though one is truly alive naturally has ripple effects on all aspects of life.

While trauma comes in many forms, a general experience is that “nothing feels safe—least of all your own body” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 136). This lack of embodiment often turns into an inability to trust others, relationships, and self—as well as feelings of helplessness or rage. “Rage that has nowhere to go is redirected against the self, in the form of depression, self-hatred, and self-destructive actions” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 136). It is here that trauma and mental health concerns find their connection. Students with trauma may exhibit disruptive behaviours (such as aggressive meltdowns), or isolating, depressive tendencies (such as shutdowns), or both. A basic awareness of the effects of trauma can help educators offer a deeper understanding to our students, and thus a more individualized response to the ways our students show up each day. From another angle, in order for educators to not be triggered by our students, fragment, or respond by hyper- and hypo-arousal, it is important that we explore our own histories (at times under the care of a trained professional) to be able to self-regulate and be more fully present for and attuned to ourselves and our students.

As summarized in his book *Trauma and Memory*, Peter Levine (2015) writes that “trauma shocks the brain, stuns the mind, and freezes the body” (p. xxi). If the healing of trauma can best be done through a body-awareness approach, as advocated by both van der Kolk and Levine, then the ability to experience embodiment when going about one’s day is essential. Keeping these understandings of trauma in mind while writing this dissertation was important, as it helped me to better understand the experiences many children may have lived, and how adults can best attend

to them and their needs. Even though trauma was not a main focus of this research project, its connection to mental health concerns make it worthwhile to reflect upon.

### ***Mood Disorders: Facts & Statistics***

In light of all this, depression is currently a leading health concern in North America, and mental illnesses “have a major impact on the Canadian economy in terms of productivity losses and health care costs” (Health Canada, 2002, p. 20). Mood disorders are prevalent and suicide rates are on the rise. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that globally, “the total estimated number of people living with depression increased by 18.4% between 2005 and 2015” (WHO, 2017, p. 8). The worldwide number of people living with anxiety disorders increased 14.9% during the same timeframe (p. 10). In Canada specifically, at any given time, 10.4% of our population experiences a mental illness (Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2019, p. 11). It costs \$34,418 annually to support someone with severe mental illness living in the community, which is a demanding financial allocation for governmental and health care resources.

Further, mental health concerns affect not only adults, but children and youth as well. In fact, “70% of mental health problems and illnesses have their onset during childhood or adolescence” (Mental Health Facts and Statistics, n.d., p. 1). Sadly, “only one-third of those who need mental health services in Canada actually receive them” (p. 1). Since educators are in contact with children and youth for many hours each day, we are in a position to support students in recognizing wellness concerns and have the opportunity to contribute to the lives of the young in such a way as to hopefully reduce the onset of mental health issues.

Research proves that “emotional literacy, meaning developing competency in understanding one’s own feelings and those of others” supports good mental health and childhood development (Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2019, p. 53). In schools, educators

can support students in many key ways related to good mental health, including the ability to handle day-to-day demands and unexpected problems as well as integration with peers (p. 54). EPSB's (2018) *Navigating mental health* document, for example, suggests supporting sound mental health in students through "regulating emotional and physical states," "self-reflection and self-monitoring," and "focusing attention," (p. 5), all aspects that this research implemented with children. Recent Alberta policy articulates using a strength-based approach to mental health in schools, which focuses on "building resiliency," "enhancing social-emotional learning," and "supporting recovery" (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 17), which are all factors I considered when designing this project even prior to much of this documentation being published in the province.

Rather than educators simply being trained to look for signs and indicators that our students may be experiencing mental distress, this work highlights the importance to proactively foster mental wellness in students as well as shift their perception from individual students as being contributing members of society to being inherently valuable as four-part people. This shift brings attention to the deeper spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of students even before crisis situations arise. It is also crucial for students to know how to, and feel comfortable to, express the various emotions they are experiencing and not simply push away emotions they deem as "negative." Crisis situations may even be bypassed—with healing via safe, caring relationships the trigger may even dissolve. This happens when the root wound of a child or adult is healed.

At times mental health strategies in general are over-focused on eradicating pain rather than learning how suffering may foster growth. "This dread of suffering, I believe, is based on ignorance about what suffering teaches and how it can be transformed" (Fidyk, 2011, p. 157). I offer that a life of wholeness is one that does not—cannot—avoid suffering, but rather learns how to become friends with pain and sorrow so that these experiences are no longer as scary as once

imagined. The trick is for educators to be better able to support youth appropriately in their suffering and not focus primarily on their behaviour. In turn, pain and sorrow become part of what it means to live a full life as a human being. As Thomas Moore, Jungian-influenced educator and author (1992) writes, “care of the soul is ... not primarily a method of problem solving. Its goal is not to make life problem-free, but to give ordinary life the depth and value that come with soulfulness” (p. 4). This concept of “caring” differs greatly from that of “curing,” which tends to be the focus of the contemporary medical model. Much of our role as educators is to care for children.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2015a) outlines that it is possible to reduce the number of people affected by mental illness because they “know that promotion, prevention and early intervention targeted at children and families can produce significant net cost benefits, such as through parent education and family support” (p. 2). While this research does not focus primarily on prevention of mental illness, by attending to the lives of young people from the perspective of educators, promotion of mental wellness can be fostered through enhanced education and support. In this vein, I wonder what the discussion might look like if we focused not only on intervention, but rather on fostering a sense of wholeness and a connection to one’s inner life from kindergarten onward.

One way that fostering wholeness becomes possible is to regard people holistically, in a way that recognizes that well-being is unique to each individual. As Simran L., a youth ambassador for the Mental Health Commission of Canada states, “Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. It means striking a balance among being emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually well. And just as fingertips differ from one person to another, so too does mental health” (quoted in the Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 18). It is important to pay attention to these matters early on in the lives of the young, as “early childhood

and adolescence are sensitive mental development phases for youth” (EPSB, 2018, p. 9). Too often the statistics emphasize the numbers behind mental illness in Canada, without considering the individual people affected. In my study of wholeness and well-being, numbers are not the focus. They are simply presented to demonstrate the need to attend to the wellness of our young, and as a reminder of how important it is to allow people to truly connect to what it is that brings them life rather than merely follow society’s flawed recipe for success.

This research in well-being is significant because it acknowledges the lack of creative attention being given to mental health and well-being in educational settings. Further, it considers what alternative perspectives (those rooted in wisdom traditions and including Indigenous ways of knowing and depth psychology) can bring to the current state of health and wellness. Indeed, the fact that mental health struggles are on the rise in Canada and worldwide propels me to ask: what is happening in our society that people have lost footing, unsure of how to be truly well? No matter where responses may be found, one thing can be certain: we must look at some of the root causes of these concerns rather than merely how to lessen the effects. It is here that this research project finds its niche. By looking at causes that stem back to and reflect views of what it means to be human, it is possible to recognize the worldview in which people situate their perspective, as separated from or connected to all of life and place. And by recognizing that educators influence students not just by our teaching, but by our very *being*, it is clear that our own self-awareness and emotional self-regulation plays an important role in supporting and co-regulating our students. By showing up and taking responsibility for ourselves, we are in essence showing up for them.

In the research project, I facilitated body-centred and arts-based encounters with the participants as we explored questions of well-being. This approach offers one way to support young people in processing their emotions in and with the world—through facing themselves—

without getting bogged down with mental health concerns that may originally arise from an inability to know how to connect with themselves and others. Further, it offered children ways to connect with their struggles in a supportive manner, allowing them to gain increased perspective about their lives and the situations in which they find themselves.

We find ourselves nearing a significant date globally, as the World Health Organization predicts that “depression will be the single biggest medical burden on health by 2020” (Mental Health Facts and Statistics, n.d., p. 1). The Mood Disorders Society of Canada (2019) cites a more recent WHO study that now states that depression will be “the expected leading cause of disease burden by 2030” (p. 8). In a timely way, this research proposes that through an understanding of wisdom traditions and connecting with the sacred, students may recognize how to connect with authentic ways of being human.

By working in local contexts and caring for the young in our midst, as well as people of all ages living in mutuality (Nandy, 1987), perhaps communities built upon connection and relationship will contribute toward more balanced lives and toward humans who are able to experience the nuanced wellness of life. This exploration is the axiology of another way. In order to live in such a way, Eppert (2010) outlines that,

the first possibility for change comes with a deep looking into and awareness of the roots of what is happening around and within us. We can become cognisant that our outer world is a manifestation of our inner world, and so, in this light, we are challenged to redirect our questions. (p. 222)

Thus, this research is an attempt to redirect the questions away from the simplistic concerns of the medical and psychiatric models (based on statistics), and toward more complex underlying issues at the core of mental illness and general malaise in children and youth. Rather than solely focusing on these aforementioned facts and negative characteristics of depression, it may be



beneficial to recognize how pain and difficulty can be an opening into considering creative growth and development. As Moore (1992) outlines, “maybe we have to broaden our vision and see that feelings of emptiness, ... even though they seem negative, are elements that can be appropriated and used to give life fresh imagination” (p. 141). If adults in the lives of children, and children themselves, can see that these emotions are neither good nor bad, wellness may be enhanced.

Many of our young feel an “emptiness of heart” (Moore, 1992, p. 154), a more holistic term used to express “mental health concerns.” An emptiness of heart may be incredibly lonely and confusing. Those who struggle with experiences of emptiness are often unsure where to turn (hence self-harm, risky behaviour, and suicide). Offering enhanced ways of understanding their competing emotions and subsequent actions, of which there are many possible wise responses, are ways that educators can support the young. Health extends so much further than the physical, and this research demonstrates the inter-connected nature of each aspect of the four-part person. It is my hope that by attending to the wholeness and well-being of youth, educators may encourage them to address and to “learn from depression what qualities the soul needs” (Moore, 1992, p. 153), rather than becoming overwhelmed by these emotions and symptoms sometimes to the point of despair. And so I ask, as I indirectly did with my research participants, what might a life of meaning and connection look like?

### **Colonialism as Contextualization of the Concerns**

This research rests upon the understanding that “as human beings, we live in the logic of the stories we tell about the world and our place in it” (Donald, 2019, p. 119). One of the stories that plays a key role in my home country of Canada—as well as many other capitalist societies—is that of colonialism, how settlers arrived from afar with the intent of taking over the land and

Indigenous peoples who lived on it. Donald (2010), in a lecture at the University of Lethbridge, outlined his understanding of “colonialism as an extended process of denying relationship.”

Working with this logic, the ongoing consequences of colonialism play out in the lives of young people today. This relationship denial, experienced as “disconnect as a legacy of colonialism” (Donald, 2010), is the unifying problematic to which this thesis is a response.

The negative effects of colonialism are many, and this dissertation does not focus on the devastating impacts it has had and continues to have on many people, primarily Indigenous, at individual, collective, social, and geographical levels. The trauma-informed work of two Canadian Indigenous scholars, Suzanne Methot and Renee Linklater, has helped me understand the interwoven relationship between colonization and trauma that bears repeating here, as a way to frame this discussion. Methot (2019) writes, “for Indigenous peoples, the trauma of colonization is chronic because it happens across time as a result of a continual, persistent, and progressive process of loss” (p. 41). This loss is pervasive and is linked to the disconnect Donald (2010) names. In curricular and pedagogical terms, when Indigenous Canadians and non-Indigenous Canadians come together to discuss (and listen to) important matters, the relational disconnect is often amplified, due to different frames of reference. In his lecture, Donald (2010) asked multiple times, “on what—and on whose—terms can we speak?” First, he explains, we “need to excavate the colonial terrain to figure out what’s at play.”

Methot’s scholarship has allowed me to do some of this excavation work. In her own way, Methot (2019) writes of the disconnect that Donald speaks of:

[T]he straightforward and insidious work of colonization has achieved its aim: many Indigenous people are disconnected from their bodies and spirits, disconnected from family and community, disconnected from pre-colonial social support networks,

disconnected from personal and cultural identity, and disconnected from the dominant society. (p. 51)

It is in this disconnection from body and spirit that my work finds its niche—as experienced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. Quoting from Donald (2010) at length here proves helpful:

Everybody's been colonized—it doesn't matter what colour your skin is or where you're from. So we need to sort of sit together and think about this and try to figure out a way where we can speak to each other on more ethical terms. And I see this as a curricular and pedagogical imperative. (12:28)

How then, might we take up this relationality in a pedagogical way? In order to write about this relationship denial on ethical terms, I wish to first outline that I follow Linklater's (2014) lead in acknowledging “colonization as implicit in the healing dynamic” (pp. 161-162). This means that any work around healing in this country we call Canada must recognize the role colonization has played in perpetuating disconnect. She and other Indigenous practitioners in the realm of trauma and wellness work whose stories she shared in her book *Decolonizing Trauma Work* recognize “the effects of soul wounding and incorporated practices that provided healing in a cultural context” (p. 161). The soul wound is synonymous with “historical trauma..., historical legacy, American Indian holocaust, and intergenerational posttraumatic stress disorder” (Duran, Duran, Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998, p. 341) and also applies to the experiences of many Indigenous people in Canada. The ideological violence that comes with relationship denial has influenced us all. Yet, it is vital to recognize that many of the traumatic effects of this soul wounding experienced by Indigenous people is linked to the legacy of colonialism. While all are influenced by this colonial logic, this influence varies greatly depending on one's life context, circumstances, and history.

Working from Donald's (2010) definition of colonialism being the ongoing act of denying relationships, the central thesis of my work emerges: relationship denial is not only external, but is also experienced internally. When humans do not have a connection with ourselves and what is happening within, it is difficult to live as an integrated four-part person. In turn, this process of denying relationships—both outer and inner—has led to a lack of balance in life: in our lives as educators and adults who play a significant role in the lives of children, as well as in the lives of the young. Much of the work written about relationship denial focuses on external relationships: disconnect with family, community, dominant society, social support networks (Methot, 2019), the land, more-than-human entities, and the past.

This thesis research focuses upon relationship denial experienced internally, insofar as I claim that colonialism has negatively impacted many people by denying them a meaningful relationship with themselves. Externally, colonial logic has influenced education systems. This influence is evident in the design of school buildings themselves, organization of people within schools, practices of assessment and reporting, and particular notions of time that are valued in educational settings. Due to this, people are taught from a young age that the only way to “be” a “useful,” “productive,” “entrepreneurial,” human being is to deny genuine relationships with self, other, and place. We find it difficult to relate to ourselves and others as four-part people because disconnect is engrained in us, as it is embedded at the core of isolated curriculum and pedagogy that reflects teacher-centeredness. Colonialism affects us all, as the ripple effects of relationship denial continue. This research was conducted in response to the relational split from self I witnessed in my students as well as in myself and my loved ones. The aim throughout the project was to more ethically repair and renew these relationships—primarily internally yet externally as well—in the lives of my participants. In turn, I also found healing to be sacred work in my own life.

Each of the following sub-categories of the problems at play are nested within this main concern of relationship denial. Prior to expanding upon how wisdom traditions can contribute toward enhanced well-being, it is essential to elaborate further on the four main sub-concerns addressed in this research. This section contextualizes each concern and expands upon the basic description previously articulated to provide clarity as to the aims and importance of this research.

### *Inner Life*

The first main concern that this research focuses on is that many children struggle to connect with a life of meaning due first to not knowing it is of value and second, to the lack of prioritization placed on an inner life. They are unable to find a measure of wholeness or wellness as they are unsure of where to turn to seek possible responses to questions of well-being. This inability may say more about the adults of significance in the lives of children than it says about the children themselves. Nonetheless, this work rests upon the assumption that children have their own inner wisdom that guides their lives (Moore, 1992). I have noticed that many children feel unsure of how to connect with this wisdom due to the fact that they are socialized by colonial systems and values. Further, many children do not hear reassurance that it is acceptable and valuable to connect with their own knowing or inner wisdom. How might their inner guide continue to be a welcome part of their everyday reality, throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood? According to Buddhist teachings, “the spiritual path to alleviate suffering is a gradual process of ‘seeing reality as it really is’” (Zhao, 2007, p. 119). Oftentimes, it seems as though children may be more attuned to seeing this reality than adults. We would be wise to unearth their insights on how to remain connected to this reality rather than becoming schooled out of it over time. If “connecting to the sacred is perhaps our deepest need and longing” (Kornfield, 2000, p.

3), then this connection would best be fostered from a young age by families, schools, and society.

According to wisdom traditions, all beings have a link to the sacred and to the sustaining life force that helps them recognize their varying emotions. When externally-driven concerns, as privileged by neoliberal values, are over-emphasized at the expense of the sacred, families and so children may too easily lose sight of what it is that can make them whole and balanced as a human being. Thus, it is worth pondering how the sacred might be welcomed into educational settings. This work recognizes that modern education was developed to ready children for the Industrial Revolution (to work in factories and industry) (Robinson, 2008). The sacred was relegated to the select few who attended seminary or schools of theology. By situating this work in an animated paradigm, as will be outlined in Chapter Three, the role of educational settings shifts from a focus on the interests of the market to one that includes space for contemplating and embodying sacred, wise ways of being in the world, beginning in the classroom.

Some of the mental distresses, problems, and illnesses described earlier in the section on Mental Health Concerns can be attributed to the fact that many Canadians feel a huge disconnect between the personas they present to the outer world (and which may be leading their lives) and the inner self they are faced with upon self-reflection. Becker (2004) outlines how a “lack of authenticity is one of the greatest malaises of contemporary society” (p. 79). Thus, I wonder, if one is unable to connect with their genuine self or to imagine improved ways of being in the world, how might they be able to access any measure of wholeness and well-being? This work connects with children in ways that allowed them to realign themselves with their innate humanity, both the joy and pain of it. By listening to children, educators may gain insight into ways to embody being in the classroom that will enhance this connection.

The best way to outline the meaning of the phrase “inner life” is to quote Jungian analyst Hollis (2013), who asks, “Who or what but a reality superordinate to the ego is running this bizarre operation? What but a *transcendent, yet inner, presence* could attend all these operations and get it (mostly) right?” (p. 3, emphasis added). This “bizarre operation” called life can overwhelmingly be felt as meaningless and experienced as empty. Yet by recognizing that there is something beyond our ego selves (this “*transcendent, yet inner, presence*”) that has a role in the unfolding of our lives, a certain relief might be felt. While at once out of our hands (“transcendent”) and at the same time intimately personal (“inner presence”), the acknowledgment of something other than the mundane refrains of popular culture and its empty promises of fulfillment comes as a much-needed reprieve.

Hollis (2013) points out what many of us are afraid to outwardly acknowledge: “most people perceive in their bones the vast vacancies in which they swim” (p. 104). Through recognizing the existence and importance of an inner life, the pull of the power of the vast vacancies comprising much of outer reality lessens. We are each called not to figure life out or to find external success, but to grapple with life in its fullness: experiencing both joy and sorrow, wellness and illness, ease and difficulty. Hollis (2013) explains that “while this paradoxical calling forth is challenging, it is what makes us most fully human, namely, when we also embrace and embody our spirit’s intent” (p. 146). In order to be “most fully human,” it is essential to honour the insights to be found within.

### *Turning Inward*

As this research explores what it means to be well, both individually and collectively, I offer an exploration of the turn inward as an essential part in wholeness. According to Moore (1992),

we live in a time of deep division, in which mind is separated from body and spirituality is at odds with materialism. But how do we get out of this split? We can't just "think" ourselves through it, because thinking itself is part of the problem. What we need is a way out of dualistic attitudes. We need a third possibility, and that third is soul. (p. xiii)

Attending to soul, or the life force inherent in each one of us, is at the core of this inquiry, here referred to as the turn inward or the inner life. This research moves beyond merely pointing out pitfalls in current education systems to asking how educators and curriculum scholars might proceed in ways that are guided by wisdom understandings of holism rooted in an animated worldview. Regarding the dualistic split between the mind and body, a re-learning of what it is that provides our spirit with vitality and rejuvenation is needed. If "the goal is a richly elaborated life, connected to society and nature, woven into the culture of family, nation, and globe" (Moore, 1992, p. xviii), then providing students with the opportunity to recognize the importance of connection, relationships, and community life is essential to fostering wholeness and well-being. This implies an emphasis on individual wellness as related to collective wellness.

The goal is not to *cure* the young of their hurts, which "implies the end of trouble" (Moore, 1992, p. 18), but rather *care*, which "has a sense of ongoing attention" (p. 19). By caring for ourselves as well as for others, we may be attentive to the nuances experienced in the course of living life as an authentic human being. Educators sharing life with our students in school settings can become attuned to the needs of the young if we offer them this ongoing attention of ourselves, as well as offer ourselves up to reciprocal learning from the youth. By living in this manner, students are able to see their teachers as living examples for how they might pay attention to that which is at play in their own inner depths. In essence, this is what I attempted to do throughout the entire time researching with the group of students at Mirror Lake School (a pseudonym).



Coming to a point where we can acknowledge our mental health needs as four-part people requires the ability to look inside ourselves. This is a way to honour what it is that sustains us and provides us with life-giving strength. Unfortunately, many seem to have forgotten how to do this over time. As Weber-Pillwax (2001) lays out,

we know what we need to sustain ourselves, to support our own well-being. We know and we hold it all within ourselves. At the same time, we reach out to others like ourselves and to our young people who may not have those connections that sustain them. (p. 172)

As educators, connecting with what sustains us requires us to be vulnerable as well as attentive to the vulnerability of students (Hart, 2001). Acknowledging that vulnerability is not easy, since we as adults do not often listen to the inner voice that knows what we need to sustain ourselves. Yet only by becoming vulnerable ourselves does it become possible to empathize with the young on their journey toward authenticity. This approach to sharing life provides us with new language and perspective with which to wisely address questions of wholeness and well-being.

This research proposes an understanding of “needs” beyond the common ideas of food, clothing, and housing (Macarov, 2003), to include a balanced state of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. By accessing “non-religious ways to transform suffering and nurture our sacred connection to life” (Kornfield, 2009, p. 5), this discussion of wellness is enhanced. As adults, we often forget “that we are born with [a] shining spirit” (Kornfield, 2009, p. 15), due to getting bogged down with the pressures and stresses of daily life. As human beings, “we give so much attention to our protective layers of fear, depression, confusion, and aggression that we forget who we really are” (Kornfield, 2009, p. 15) and in the meantime perpetuate a lack of genuine wellness in our lives due to not even stopping to consider our deepest needs.<sup>6</sup> People

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<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge the fact that many people do question their well-being and what their deepest needs and desires may be. However, I have observed that countless people purposely choose to make their lives full and busy with matters

are experiencing loneliness at high rates, despite the fact that they may be regularly externally stimulated. I propose that this loneliness amidst busy-ness and affluence stems from the lack of internal connection. If people are experiencing the denial of a life-giving relationship with self (which, for some, may also link to the sacred), it leaves them feeling adrift. This links with the next concern—a sense of time—insofar as turning inward requires a slowing down of time in order for it to turn into sacred time. The place and time of the sacred realm is where healing happens, and this often begins with an inward turn.

Both adults and children alike would benefit from taking the time to ponder what it is that would enable them to be the fullest expression of themselves as human beings. This ethic carries over into curriculum and pedagogy, as Aoki (2005b) writes that, “it is a new metaphor of teachers and students we need—one that will avoid reduction of teachers and students from beings-as-humans to beings-as-things” (pp. 128-129). By turning inward to recognize what it is that provides each of us as unique human beings with our life-giving qualities, it becomes possible to live lives that are more whole, purposeful, and authentic.

### ***Sense of Time & Place***

A second main concern that this research addresses is how children are growing up in a time where there is little opportunity for them to simply *be*, as the emphasis is on *doing*, and often doing *rapidly*. This problem is linked to the first: if students are expected to maintain a fast pace of production (in any realm of their lives), it becomes difficult to prioritize turning inward for a sense of guidance and to appreciate the process of how life unfolds. In many educational systems built upon colonialist logic, the view of time tends to be short-sighted, emphasizing

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and concerns that enable them to avoid looking into the recesses of their inner spirit. I propose that perhaps if more people, myself included, would be willing to turn inward and to slow down their busy lives, deeper wellness may be experienced due to an increased ability to recognize factors contributing to wholeness.

lesson plans, unit plans, and yearly plans with little regard for the connection of this material to the overall life and learning of the children in our classrooms. Chambers (2008) explains her context in Blackfoot territory in southern Alberta, and how getting to know “*kitaowahsinnoon*, the land that nourishes us, and what is appropriate to do in that place, has taken a long time (Blood & Chambers, 2008)” (p. 116). Blood and Chambers further express how this takes much longer than a semester or a budget year and even a term of government, “longer than forty years” (p. 116). Similarly, this thesis is interested in how a curriculum of place “calls for a different sense of time” (p. 115) as well as “calls for an ‘education of attention’” (p. 120). These aspects of a curriculum of time and place are drawn upon to highlight how a short-sighted understanding of time negatively impacts our children.

Coulthard (2010), a Dene scholar, articulates the different cultural priorities of time and place. He states that most Western societies place “time as the narrative of central importance” (p. 79), based on a focus on development. Many Indigenous cultures tend to focus on place as “a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world” (p. 79), because knowing arises via relationship. We do not know in isolation. His message is that it is important to recognize the relationship between humans and places as “mutually interdependent” and based on “cooperation” rather than competition (p. 80). The over-prioritizing of time and the speed at which many actions are taken and decisions are made in schools based on the colonial model of dominance are linked to the neoliberal values prioritized in North American society, another of the main concerns I outline.

This work is embarked upon with the desire to *be* and *do* differently in the world. I seek to turn away from the immense activity that runs daily life in schools and beyond. By writing an alternative response, recognizing that frantic activity and externally-focused discourses of success

cannot offer internal fulfillment and peace, this work provides an inward turn. As Christian monk Thomas Merton (2012) writes about current North American society:

We seek the meaning of our life in activity for its own sake, activity without objective, efficacy without fruit, scientism, the cult of unlimited power, the service of the machine as an end in itself.... The life of frantic activity is invested with the noblest of qualities, as if it were the whole end and happiness of man: or rather as if the life of man had no inherent meaning whatever and that it had to be given a meaning from some external source. (p. 6)

Children are at risk of not knowing, not learning, not being able to honour their intuition that tells them that there is more to life than this frantic activity. Merton (2012) continues,

The reason for this inner confusion and conflict is that our technological society has no longer any place in it for wisdom that seeks truth for its own sake, that seeks the fullness of being, that seeks to rest in an intuition of the very ground of all being. (p. 7)

Thus, I wonder what classrooms might look like if we provided space for our young to learn how to connect with a different notion of time. By slowing down, through experiencing time as sacred, children are able to connect with their inner wisdom by encountering time's healing capacity. Rather than feeling fear about not being able to teach all of the necessary curricular outcomes, educators can instead recognize that focusing on the values and attitudes embedded within the mandated outcomes can enhance this connection.

### ***Neoliberal Values***

The third main concern that this research addresses is the over-emphasis that many capitalist societies place on the role of the market in dictating how people live their lives.

Children growing up under this sway of the market are (consciously or unconsciously) taught that

their well-being is reliant on these external “successes.” Under these values, if so many people are suffering from various forms of mental distress, problems, and illness (diagnosed or not), then this is an alarm to wake us up to a major concern in the world. This is neither the time nor place for quick fixes or band-aid solutions, but rather an opportunity to re-think how our educational system buys into the Market Logic (Smith, 2014) that seemingly makes people feel as though their fulfillment will be found through owning, procuring, or acquiring more and better “stuff.” Wholeness and wellness require so much more.

### *Market Logic’s Effect on Children*

Neoliberal values prioritize consumerism and economic success over any other measure of wellness. This means that competition, individualism, and consumerism reign through deregulation of the market and increased privatization. Consumerist, capitalist societies have been referred to as being guided by the logic of the market, as popular in Eurocentric<sup>7</sup> societies. Market Logic (Smith, 2014) equates life fulfillment with financial and economic success. David Smith writes about Market Logic as the overarching and limiting impact that thinking in a way where all of life is linked to the powerful sway of the market has on interactions, economic or otherwise. (I capitalize the term, following the same style of his usage throughout his writing.) Smith argues that this logic is skewed primarily but not solely because it sells people “a deliberate but hidden nonlinkage between its promises and its deliveries” (p. 23).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Here, the term “Eurocentric” refers to a way to articulate views that originate in the European value system of colonization and the Protestant work ethic. While I recognize that not all people of European descent hold these values and not all schools in Canada rest upon the same foundational understandings, in relating to Market Logic the term “Eurocentric” nonetheless best describes pedagogical contexts that view children more as disparate than holistic entities. “Eurocentric” is defined as “considering Europe and Europeans as focal to world culture, history, economics, etc.” (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> For further reading on Market Logic, see Smith, 2014; McMurtry, 2002; and Macarov, 2003.

North American children today are growing up in a society that is mired in capitalist values. In current educational systems built upon the legacy of colonialism, there tends to be few opportunities for the voices of children to be heard, as the adult discussions *about* children take precedence. The values of Market Logic have abandoned children, morphing childhood as we know it into a stage of life largely mimicking adult pre-occupations and thus guiding the young in ways different from past ideals. Schooling seeks to ready these miniature adults to be productive and entrepreneurial citizens (Alberta Education, 2011). In light of this, children growing up under adults mired in colonial logics have witnessed the prioritization of external success and validation. In contrast, this research, steeped in the values of wisdom traditions, hears from the children themselves, pays attention to them as individuals and as a collective, and genuinely cares about them, their lived experience, and the ways external factors play out in their lives.

By providing a safe and loving context for children to face their feelings of disillusionment, fear, and unconscious obsession to keep up with consumer culture, this research seeks to press pause on the fast pace of modern life in order to question the presented market values. My hope is that through this work, educators and curriculum theorists will be better able to enter in to genuine discussions with children of all ages about what it is that brings them toward wholeness and well-being, for the sake of all of us. This exploration is based upon an understanding that:

our current age [is] one of great capitalism, in which national and global markets monopolise our outer and inner lives, determining and regulating much of how our time is spent, what we invest ourselves in emotionally, bodily, and cognitively, and how we relate to one another. (Eppert, 2010, p. 221)

These effects of Market Logic influence both adults and children in obvious and subtle ways.

While Eppert (2010) mentions the effects on three parts comprising a four-part person (emotional, physical, and mental), this research points to the importance of also considering the

spiritual wellness of the young and how this part of them is influenced by consumer culture. In light of this, what might be some of the student responses to questions of wholeness and well-being? This dissertation emerges from an understanding that “childhood... is now under attack as industry and corporations freely exploit children’s vulnerabilities and neglect their interests. This must, and can, be stopped. But first, it must be understood” (Bakan, 2011, p. 13). Through this work, I strive to present greater understandings of the many influences that affect children and their growth, in particular.

This research, however, does not focus on how to stop neglecting the interests of children or exploiting their vulnerabilities (as outlined by Bakan above). Rather, it focuses on the particular, the micro, and by moving from that with which I am directly faced into the general, macro realm, seeks greater awareness. Further, this research addresses the over-dominance of consumerist values in education (Harvey, 2010) by seeking wise understandings of issues surrounding capitalism’s effects on children. Part of the neoliberal agenda understandably includes preparing children to be future participants of the workforce. However, instead of viewing education solely as a way to prepare students for contributing to the economic growth of their country and for being active citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit one day (as discussed in Alberta Education, 2005; Alberta Education, 2011; Pinar, 2009; and Smith, 2006), I wonder how schools might support the development of a full human being rather than merely an economic one.

Questions of what it means to live a meaningful and fulfilling life are inspired by the deeply human desire to live well in the world. By this I mean the nigh-universal quest for purpose, for knowing that one’s life matters. This research inquires into the ways that an externally-focused view of success—as generated and revered by current consumer culture—affects the well-being of children. I seek to explore the significance of the connections between

education that is predicated upon Market Logic with the urgent need to address the wholeness and wellness of children.

### ***Faulty School Structure***

The fourth concern that this research addresses is that the design of school systems are not built upon a foundation of holistic understandings of children but rather embedded in disconnected colonialist logic. Schools are not designed to care for children and youth as four-part people, with needs that are at once physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. At times, schools policies and personnel tend to perpetuate the very concerns I have laid out. Many educators are working toward more holistic ways of being with children, yet the policy and provincially mandated programs of study lag behind evolving paradigms, or are simply not interested in doing so. A major distress here is that “pedagogic concerns tend to be reduced to political ones” (van Manen, 1997, p. 141), which, when incongruent, immediately points to the misled priorities of a ministry of education. The hopelessness that lies therein is linked to the fact that when political concerns primarily guide what and how children are taught, the educational endeavour becomes mired in the language of doing (more, faster, “better”) and not being (van Manen, 1997, p. 122). Jackie Seidel (2019) expresses this concern well: “Schools emerged from the same cultural processes as industrialization, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism and often remain deeply entrenched in these his/stories, even while we often imagine that they do ‘good.’” (p. 122). How might schools become less entrenched in these his/stories?

The concern surrounding our faulty school structure can best be shared by highlighting particularities in order to shed light on the universal concern, which I do in upcoming chapters by sharing student insights and narratives (van Manen, 1997, p. 120). Over my past 15 years as an educator, I have worked under the leadership of diverse administrators. As one who sensitively



observes the subtleties of everyday life (van Manen, 1997, p. 29), it becomes clear quite quickly upon walking into a new school building whether there is a general sense of wellness. Some schools, under insightful leadership and comprised of thoughtful staff, do a wonderful job of “humanizing human life and humanizing human institutions to help human beings to become increasingly thoughtful and thus better prepared to act tactfully in situations” (van Manen, 1997, p. 21). This humanization is at the core of living as a four-part person, and is evident in school cultures that prioritize children and their fullness as four-part people. Other schools tend to let fall by the wayside the pedagogical thoughtfulness of teaching: the “unpredictable and contingent situations of everyday living with children” that animate our days (van Manen, 1997, p. 143). If embedded in neoliberal views that tout academic or entrepreneurial success over other realms of life, this thoughtfulness is not embodied.

In my experience, when working under leadership with an overt focus on the neoliberal values of product over process rather than prioritizing student (or staff) well-being, both teachers and students have difficulty remaining fully present or in touch with their bodies. Lack of presence of a teacher or school leader has a full range of repercussions for everyone in the school building, as linked to the earlier section on trauma and further discussed in Chapter Seven. Further, when a school’s priorities do not honour the very place where it is situated, or the school’s daily/weekly/yearly timetable does not reflect a slowed-down pace to honour the lives of those within it, the very mood of the staff and students shifts to one of unease. There is no room to tend to the inner life of children and youth if schools and staffs are too focused on outer priorities, whether politically driven or not.

Without pointing out generic flaws in the system, which may vary depending on province/state as well as by jurisdiction/school division—let alone between public and private education—as a “researcher . . . oriented to the world in a pedagogic way” (van Manen, 1997, p.

151), I recognize that the modern-day iteration of schooling does not do a good job of meeting the needs of children and youth as four-part people. Within my current context of the province of Alberta, the system is structured in a way that continues to reflect factory-line approaches and values in education, where students are often viewed en masse as future cogs in a wheel and schools are organized around this industry-driven schedule. I agree with Seidel (2019) when she writes that “quantitative and calculative ways of thinking can be dangerous to human well-being and communities” (p. 121), as she has witnessed in many schools and as many educators, myself included, can attest to as well.

By building relationships with ten unique children over the course of a school year throughout this research study, I learned that a solution cannot be found in passing new policy or frantically designing and implementing programs to meet the needs of more students. Rather, understanding can be found in spending quality time with the young, being present to them in the specificity of this moment, and sitting with our own fears and uncertainties of how the world influences them. This is not a solution; it does not offer a quick fix, and it may leave many educators feeling uncomfortable. Sitting in the midst of this tension, this discomfort, may be exactly what we educators need to do in order to enhance our understanding of the children in front of us and of the many different energies vying for their attention. While the scope of this dissertation is not to propose grandiose alternatives to the faulty school system as a whole, I suggest that consideration of the link between student mental health and a greater recognition of ways to resacralize be further explored. I do so in Chapter Seven, considering the specific experiences raised through the research.

## **Honouring Complexity: Attending to Children as Four-Part People**

The challenges of many children struggling to connect with what it is that makes them well—as articulated by the four main concerns outlined—are incredibly complex. The intention in this research is to shed light on the concerns while recognizing that this is a problem shared by each and every one of us. By highlighting the stories and experiences of the participants, I hope to honour the complexity, emphasize the connectivity, and bear witness to the toll taken on people when life is not approached in a way that honours each one as a four-part person.

All emotions and experiences are part of the cycle of life. As educators who play a significant role in shaping the lives of young people, I wonder about the quality of our relationships with our students. Perhaps by recognizing the dialogical relationship between all aspects within ourselves (dark/light, bad/good, unhealthy/healthy), we can view these qualities in tandem rather than as discrete opposites: first in ourselves, then in lives of the children in our midst. Just as the sun sets each night, the moon rises, making space for another way of knowing and seeing the world, without distinguishing one as better or worse than the other—simply different—and each in their own way vital. It is this recognition that sets the basis for conversations and interactions with the young in all pedagogical contexts. Therefore, “everything that happens in teaching [and learning] has at once an intellectual and an emotional dimension: They cannot be separated from one another” (Lindley, 1993, p. 18). Similarly, the educational endeavour involves a sacred dimension, which also cannot be separated out, at risk of having children disengaged from their inner lives. Through recognizing these multiple dimensions, a more holistic understanding of well-being is embodied. By focusing on questions that get at the heart of individual and collective wellness, the interactions that go on in classrooms on a daily basis are able to be considered beyond the intellectual dimension alone and thus enhanced by including the emotional and spiritual realms.

In order to fully participate in the conversation of well-being in the first place, it is important to consider why this work matters. I take my lead from Eppert (2010), who ties education together with wholeness. “Our own education, in this respect, is what we can offer our children. Etymologically, to heal means to make ‘whole, sound or well’ and derives from the Old English root, *haelen*, the ‘state of being *hal* or whole’” (p. 225). By listening to the voices of our students about what makes them well, educators can better attend to their needs as four-part people as we hear from them how to recognize and foster what it is that makes each of them well and whole.

## CHAPTER THREE: ANIMATED WORLDVIEW

### Childhood: Mennonite Roots – A Protestant Work Ethic

*We bow our heads before each meal to give thanks to the good Lord for his many blessings. I say my prayers before bed:*

*“Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
if I should die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”*

*Fear reinforced. Personalized prayers much preferred.*

*Long days on the farm filled with both work and play: shelling peas in a haphazard lawn-chair “sharing circle,” baking fresh buns that melt in your mouth, delivering meals to Dad on the field and enjoying a picnic in the stubble that signifies a bountiful harvest...*

*Spring: building rafts, swimming in the flood water in the yard and searching for tadpoles...*

*Summer: picking eggs in the smelly barn and washing down machinery until it shines...*

*Fall: playing in the truck beds full of fresh grain while anticipating going back to school so I can see my friends again...*

*Winter: cuddling up inside watching Hockey Night in Canada with Dad or trying my hand at beating my family at myriad card games...*

*Reverence, thankfulness, and a spirit of giving courses through my veins as the only way to live: this is not an option; it feels right. Our motto for how to live a life of joy:*

*J – Jesus first*

*O – others second*

*Y – you last*

*As such, life is full of service.*

*Family gatherings.*

*Home-cooked meals.*

*Volunteerism = a way of life.*

*Hard work = a worthy existence.*

### Adulthood: Rebirth – Wisdom as a Way of Being

*For what purpose are we striving to generate wisdom?*

*If it is for your own selfish purposes,  
then it cannot become very powerful.*

*Therefore, wisdom must be accompanied by a motivation of love, of compassion,  
of mercy for others,  
such that it is put to the use of others.  
-the Dalai Lama*

*Wisdom. Love. Compassion. Mercy. These are not abstract concepts but ways of living.*

*As I meditate I am mindful of these words.  
As I walk, drive my car, ride my bike, eat my breakfast, wash the dishes, meet a friend, snuggle under the covers, I am mindful of them.  
As I write I am particularly mindful of these words and the power they hold.*

*I stand shivering on the barren, snow-covered land while talking to a tree. The tears spring up unexpectedly. I cry. Oh, how I cry... I lean in to the tree itself, needing its support and craving the calming embrace of its branches. This Indigenous Learning Day is full of teachings, learnings, listening, and letting go. I don't want to leave this conversation with my tree.*

*In reading David G. Smith's (1999) Pedagon, that which is deep within me starts to stir, realizing that through studying and writing I just may be able to heal myself from some of my wounds. “Maybe this is the time to embark collectively on a new long journey inward, not for the purpose simply of celebrating our personal or collective subjectivities, but for the more noble one of laying down the outward things that presently enslave us” (Smith, 1999, p. 5). This dissertation emerges as my attempt to lay down that which enslaves me. I am here. I am ready.*

## **Spirit: Its Presence in Life and Absence in Research**

On the surface, my childhood looked idyllic to others from our community. There are umpteen aspects of it that I adored and that fed me as a four-part person. Yet much of the time I felt embarrassed about my roots, about my family, about our way of life. By facing some of these inner disparities through the process of this research I have indeed embarked on a “long journey inward” (Smith, 1999, p. 5) to work through my shame.

A journey of this sort cannot and does not offer prescriptive and thus limiting solutions. Instead, I have found that by contemplating wholeness and well-being in the lives of the young in this research, I have been able to do so in my own life as well. By bringing issues such as mental health, the sacred, and embodied wisdom into discussion with one another, I seek to highlight the importance of bringing a spiritual aspect into educating our young. The first step is to acknowledge the existence of an inner life as a way to inherently link these concerns. The next step is to clarify what I mean by the terms *sacred* and *spiritual* so that the terms are not off-putting.

In discussing the sacred realm, this research draws upon Hollis’ (2013) provocative words: “What blows *spiritus* into the lungs of the bawling infant? That *spiritus – esprit*, re-spiration, in-spiration – is energy, a force field blowing, blowing through eternity into time-bound bodies whose curbing trajectory brings them inexorably back to earth” (p. 1). In this work, *sacred* is not equated with God or religion but rather with soul and a recognition of the role of the spirit at play in life.

Not only is life itself sacred, but so too are non-human entities as well as the particular lives of my research participants and the very act of writing about their experiences. In writing, I found the intent of Brant (1994), in her essay collection titled *Writing as Witness*, helpful: “I hope to convey the message that words are sacred. Not because of the person transmitting them, but

because words themselves come from the place of mystery that gives meaning and existence to life” (p. 3). By recognizing that writing itself is sacred, and the act of writing is an act of meaning-making (much like the act of reading as meaning-making, as Ferreiro (2003) outlines), this research becomes imbued with humanity.

Writing and discussing the realm of spirit in education is often avoided. This may, in part, be due to the fact that people feel spirituality is a private, personal matter, or that in Canada religion and education are separate entities, or that many educators are uncomfortable or unsure how to approach the topic in a way that feels safe and acceptable within public school systems. Etymologically, spirit is defined as the “animating or vital principle in man and animals,” these origins rooted in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century (OED, n.d.). I propose that this vital principle is intentionally left out of educational literature due to fear of the possible repercussions. In the United States under the First Amendment, people are (understandably) not allowed to “proselytize to children and youth” (Simon & Norton, 2011, p. 314). In Canada, in public school settings, the same holds true (for examples, see Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2016; Manitoba: The Human Rights Code, 1987/2010). Many educators, however, misunderstand these rules and read them to mean that they are not able to discuss or express various religions or spiritualities whatsoever, which is not the case (see Simon & Norton, 2011, p. 314). Simon and Norton (2011) argue that spirituality should be made visible in the classroom, meaning that it should be a topic of fruitful discussion. However, out of fear, many avoid spirituality in educational research and practice altogether due to not wanting their intentions (for healthy, interactive conversation alone) to be misconstrued.

Unfortunately, this (and the manifestation of the same outside of educational institutions) has led to what the Dalai Lama (1999) called “a neglect of . . . our inner dimension” (p. 16). Due to this underlying neglect, many people struggle with the ability to even consider the role

spirituality and the realm of the sacred might play in their life—personally or collectively. The Dalai Lama (1999) continues by saying that “a purely external approach will not suffice. What I propose is a spiritual revolution” (p. 17).

When it comes to curriculum and pedagogy, this spiritual revolution may be a subtle one. An appropriate place to begin might be to simply provide space in classrooms for children to “come as they are” (Seidel, 2006, p. 1908) and to recognize that they are each “soulful in ways they themselves reveal” (Coles, 1990, p. xviii). At this point, I will not speculate as to further reasons why the spiritual realm is overlooked in educational settings, beyond fear on the part of the adults. Instead, I choose to emphasize, as Seidel (2006) articulates, that classrooms are places of connection in each present moment—connections that are alive and imbued with the vital, inspired principle. As educators, our roles are well considered to be sacred. We have responsibilities to our students as four-part-people. Some of these include our role “to create a place where children can connect to the world, each one, in his or her own way and time. To imagine our work as sacred, these decisions full of infinite consequences” (Seidel, 2006, p. 1913). When considered in this manner, classroom interactions are inherently spiritual.

As a way to demonstrate how learning is a sacred act, I draw upon Simon and Norton’s (2011) study that intersects activism and spirituality in discussions of social justice and education. The authors point out that most everyone has spiritual boundaries, albeit ones that are fluid and changing as people learn and change throughout life (p. 311). Their study indicates that by learning about possible ways to respond to injustices through reading about spiritualities and activism in children’s and young adult literature, students are able to consider big issues in the world from an angle different than what they may have experienced in their lives before. Or if the ideas are congruent, they are provided with a new language or context in which to express their own blossoming understandings of the issues. In the context of my study, I flip this narrative in a



way, where (secular) children's books and various body-centred modalities are drawn upon as a way to encourage students to recognize their sacred existence as four-part-people (including their spirituality). By providing them with a way in which they can experience the interaction of their own mental health with the realm of the spiritual or the sacred (mimicking the intersection of activism and spirituality in the above-mentioned study), students might begin to recognize a connectedness in their lives. In my own life and work, I have found ways to approach teaching and learning that are indeed spiritual and sacred. The enhanced connection (both with others and with my inner self) that I have experienced because of this honouring of the sacred is what drew me to include the realm of spirit in this work. The next section outlines how the research approach used in this study focused on wisdom as a way of being in the world.

### **The Way of Wisdom: Research Approach**

As the way of research, wisdom traditions are the sensibility guiding this work, tying it directly with pedagogy and educational ideas. Since “etymologically, *pedagogy* comes from the Greek words *agogue*, to lead, and *pedae*, children” (Aoki, 2005a, p. 213), wisdom is taken up as a way in which educators may “lead” children in the multiple facets of their lives, as well as in turn be led by them. The relationship cannot be one-way, as children have an important role to play in adult lives and understandings. The etymological root of the word “educate” comes from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century Latin term *educare*, meaning to “bring up, rear” (OED, n.p.) and the related *educere*, linked to “bring out, lead forth” (OED, n.p.). Moore (1992) expands: “*education* means ‘to lead out.’ We seem to understand this as leading away from childhood, but maybe we could think of it as eliciting the wisdom and the talents of childhood itself” (pp. 52-53). From the Greek origins of “lead,” *agogue*, the implication here is not that adults have a powerful role over children in that they themselves hold utmost control, but that the role of “leading” is co-

constituted. “To lead” (v.) etymologically comes from the verb “to guide,” Old English *laedan* “cause to go with one, lead, guide, conduct, carry; sprout forth; bring forth, pass (one’s life)” (OED, n.d.). In this dissertation, I use it in the sense of “going with one,” hand-in-hand. This clarification is an important one: the young have much to teach adults and it is our responsibility to be open to learning from them.

Smith (2014) focuses on the need for more of a unity between these relationships, insofar as “a new epistemology is needed which begins with an understanding of the essential unity of the world” (p. 52). As adults, we would be wise to consider more deeply the perspectives of children regarding well-being and appropriate ways to live lives of meaning, and can only do so by recognizing that “the child represents no longer an *incomplete* but an *alternative* epistemology” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 157), not viewed as a miniature version of adults but as their own subjectivity. I am inspired by Smith’s (2003) call that our adult responsibility is “to try to genuinely hear the young, to engage them conversationally about the affairs of life” (p. 45) in order to truly share life and honour the human-beingness of each one. This study focuses on participant engagement in various ways, providing a context in which the students could enter into the research itself and thus engage outwardly in the world through turning inward. By drawing on various wisdom traditions alongside the stories of wellness from the children themselves, a deeper pedagogical relationship may be heightened.

I do not attempt to articulate exactly what a certain wisdom tradition may have to say about a particular concern, but rather to write in a manner that considers various perspectives within wisdom traditions of wholeness and well-being, holding them delicately in dialogue with one another. While by no means exhaustive, the traditions that I included in this dialogue are ones that I have learned from in significant ways throughout my life. In this way, I do not seek to appropriate the traditions by drawing upon their key teachings, but rather to highlight the

specificity of the insights of particular wisdom traditions on the concerns of wholeness and well-being. What follows is a compilation of years of reading, writing, and researching in an “arts-informed” manner (Cole & Knowles, 2001)—a very process that has unfolded holistically, lovingly, and in honour of those who inspired me to question in the first place.

In considering the purposes of research, Coe (2012) outlines, “that a single piece of research often has a mixture of aims of different kinds” (p. 9), especially in educational research. The four categories of aims he sets out include scientific (focusing on “a search for knowledge”), political (“used to help improve education in some way”), therapeutic (that which “sets out to help individuals,” often participants), and aesthetic (that “may have a poetic or literary quality, setting out to tell a story, perhaps using arts-based forms to present its messages, and aiming to connect with readers on an emotional or spiritual level (Barone and Eisner, 2006))” (p. 9). While the research conducted in this study has minor resonance with each these aims, the primary focus is on therapeutic and aesthetic aims. I set about trying to connect with readers emotionally and spiritually as a way to open up possibilities for what education *might be*.

Too often it seems as though holistic education and mindful practices are taken up in classroom settings with an attitude governed by accountability aims or program “add-ons” for educators to attempt as a new way to meet the needs of students. In each of these cases, teachers or administrators may feel that if they simply implement a new program or track results of mindfulness at school, they are changing the way teachers teach and students learn. This frequently disembodied approach is merely a band-aid solution that may fix some symptoms temporarily but does not in any way address the underlying issues themselves—the illness or ailment where children and youth robotically go throughout their day completing assignments, communicating with friends via social media more than in person, experiencing myriad emotions

that they cannot describe or even truly feel, and simply going through the motions of life without fully resonating with a sense of purpose or wholeness. In essence, it is a disease of disconnection.

I seek to attend to the well-being of children through a cyclical fashion of circumambulation, or revisiting repeatedly in different ways, living the ethic of the research project in a manner that engages in wisdom traditions while embodying an ethic of wellness throughout all interactions. This ethic is one that prioritizes relationships—with self, other, and the natural world—and will be further outlined at the end of this chapter. By combining the interpretive investigation alongside the research study with students, I contemplate well-being and encourage others to do the same. In so doing, “we might begin to develop our own sense of community and connection, explore the obstacles to these, rather than write another grant for how to build communities ‘out there’” (Taubman, 2000, p. 32). Local communities, such as the students in the grade four/five classroom at my research site, benefit from research such as this. Following the words of journalist Chris Hedges (2010): “it is community that gives our lives, even in pain and grief, a healing solidarity” (p. 13). Wisdom traditions are rooted in community and a communal sense of self and may indeed support the healing journey, as these traditions honour humans as four-part people.

### ***The Conscious Pairing of Wisdom Traditions and Life Writing***

By acknowledging the diversity of experience in education, the “tapestry of visions that constitute the collective vision of humanity” (MacPherson, 2011, p. 10) becomes more complete and well-rounded. Since interpretive imagination engages in “Life hermeneutically,” meaning it tries “to understand ever more profoundly what makes life Life, what makes living a living” (Smith, 2006, p. 105), this work seeks to provoke awareness amongst educators. The only way that I am able to respond to the question of “how now shall we proceed pedagogically?” (Smith,

1999) is by saying that we must involve our whole being (in contact with the sacred and particularities of place), as well as the children themselves, in this work.

This way of being and working resonated for the students in my study, not by discussing questions of wholeness and well-being in an abstract, disconnected manner, but rather by planning interactions that allowed them to experience it directly. In building upon my pedagogic stance that children have a wise understanding of how they wish to interact with and respond to all that the world presents them, the design of this research study allowed them to connect with and reflect upon their own inner wisdom. As detailed in Chapter Five on methods and ethics, it was essential to first build trusting relationships over time and then to honour the children's experiences and their present way of being in the world as a way to ethically value and share their lives and stories.

By drawing upon wisdom traditions as the unifying basis for this research, I have found the work to hold traction both personally and professionally. Wisdom offers a way to consider the destructive legacies of colonialism, particularly the relationship denial experienced by many, in a way that is not simply harsh and accusatory, but rather thoughtful and reflective. Healing can only happen if we—individually and collectively—face problems in a way that considers them differently than the mindsets that initiated them in the first place. As Smith (2014) articulates, “wisdom actually has no interest in winning or losing, but only in living well. Considering what that might mean in an increasingly complex and conflicted world might now be a special charge to educators” (p. 87). I take up this charge through the approach of life writing, which will be expanded upon in a coming section. Life writing invites both researcher and participant stories in ways that highlight living intentionally with our complex and conflicted world.

I engage in life writing (through the creation of found poems) as a form of interpretive research to discuss concerns of wholeness and well-being. This method honours the wisdom

traditions themselves, as well as opens conversation about mental health and wellness. Zuss (1999) outlines how one can pedagogically link a personal story to a greater collective story. It is by “writing self as a convergence of differences, in intersecting relational fields of experience and its becomings, that provides the vital spark gap between interior psychic life and presiding forms of social power” (p. 94). By drawing on my own inner understandings and experiences, and encouraging the children in my study to do the same, I hope to ignite this spark. Consciously attending to holism can be done by highlighting the importance of the sacred in the lives of all beings. This provides the life force needed in all actions so that attending to wellness is not merely manifest in the activities one does but is rather a *way of being*. Inspiration is taken here from Taubman (2000), who states that:

we would all be much better off if we spent more time quietly sitting with ourselves, one another, and our questions, and facing the fears that so often drive us to “do,” drive us to distraction, drive us to fantasize final solutions. (p. 32)

And so, we sit. Stop. Think. Feel. Be. Face our fears. Open up possibilities. Ask our questions. Live life with one another. In part motivated by a quest to heal myself, this research articulates how through individually spending time with ourselves and our innermost questions, we are able to live more completely as our “true self, which is the divine indwelling . . . within [us]” (Rohr, 2003, 14:39). By being mindful of our inner lives, we are able to turn back to the outer world in grounded, embodied ways.

### ***Attending to the Sacred***

Cree Elder Bob Cardinal has spoken resonant words: “the longest journey each of us will ever have to take is from our head to our heart” (personal communication, April 12, 2013). By acknowledging the role of the sacred in educational realms (including emotional and spiritual

ways of being) that primarily focus on the mental and physical aspects of a person, this work provides a way to imagine and consider “other ways to be” (D. Donald, personal communication, March 16, 2013). A weighty pedagogical concern is that this call to imagine other ways to be is not considered and thus many human beings are struggling, both outwardly and inwardly. These struggles are rooted in disconnection and manifest in the four major concerns outlined earlier: lack of a connection with an inner life, a skewed sense of time and place, the overarching influence of neoliberal values, and the faulty school/societal structure that we live in. This research considers differently<sup>9</sup> what it means to be a human being.

By focusing on the wholeness and well-being of children, it is essential to explore the current curricular and pedagogical deficits in educational settings as well as in the varied lives of our young in relation to questions of how to be wisely aware, or in the Blackfoot language, *aakakiiyo'ssin* (D. Donald, personal communication, April 10, 2013). Being wisely aware inherently involves paying attention, as revealed by the Blackfoot word *aakakiiyosit*, which loosely translates as “to pay attention acutely so that one can be aware of danger and act wisely” (Chambers, 2008, p. 121). In Cree, paying attention translates as *wâskamisiwin*, which implies the need to get oneself centered in multi-sensory ways (D. Donald, personal communication, October 15, 2014). Acting wisely in schools (and beyond) may require a reimagining of the role schools play in society as well as the role of teachers in the lives of students. As Smith (2014) asks, “The question is, pedagogically speaking, how can the shape and character of education be

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<sup>9</sup> By “considering differently,” I refer to thought that bucks against the trend of naturalized discourse which includes but is not limited to the fast-paced, consumer-driven Market Logic perpetuated by the majority of educational centres in North America. This future-oriented vision of success tends to overlook the individuality of children in the present and thus takes away from the ability to imagine other ways of being. A “different” way of viewing human-beingness might include more of a focus on the connection between the past, present, and future as well as an emphasis on humans as more than cogs in the economic wheel—that is, as beings with deep commitments, desires, and qualities contributing to their wholeness. For further reading, see Donald’s (2019) *Homo economicus and forgetful curriculum: Remembering other ways to be a human being*.

reimagined?” (p. 46). Through this work, I seek to question common sense and institutional notions of wellness rooted in colonialism and replace them with wisdom insights on how to be well. Here, by drawing upon Blackfoot understandings, as well as Cree teachings, I highlight particular ways of being in and understanding the world rooted in ways of wisdom.

Fidyk (2012) encourages this paying attention in a wise way by being “attuned to life where grace may appear” (p. 349). She describes how “such attention does not imply that something must be done; rather, it emphasizes a respect of attending deeply beyond the sensate” (p. 349). Attending to the embodied, sensory world around us in tandem with the embodied, intuitive world within us, is an authentic way to pay attention to life and its many intricacies. By turning inward, we are better equipped to turn outward in a life-giving way. As Jardine (2012a) makes clear, “actual, practical, practiced, ground-level workings of the world is where a pedagogy in peace finds its real refuge” (p. 223). Life writing that holds insights from wisdom traditions can indeed be a refuge in which to immerse oneself as well as look at seemingly overwhelming issues from a fresh perspective.

Attunement to the sacred can be found by honouring the four-part person, that which makes up our fullness as human beings. By living as “real human beings,” (the Cree translation of *nehiyawak* or “four-part people,” as previously outlined) adults—and educators—might be better able to fully see children in such a light that allows them to live this way too, both in and out of the classroom. When the nuances inherent in finding this inner and outer connection are honoured, the lives of the young may be given the opportunity to serve as an example of how to live well. In no way is attunement a grandiose solution to the problem of relationship denial discussed earlier, but rather offers one way in which educators may approach the concerns—in ourselves and in the lives of our students. This is what inspires me as a curriculum scholar: being able to participate in a conversation that wants to “re-support a journey within through an



integrative participation with soul, body, emotion, mind, and spirit. Indeed, living vibrantly and relationally calls for deep reach into all we have to offer that can increase our wisdom and compassion” (Eppert, 2010, p. 226). Being attuned to the sacred thus provides us with a starting point from which to proceed.

### ***Living Well with Students***

Smith (2014) guides us: “the point is to open a space where the student can begin to consider the auspices of their lives” (p. 55). This research and dissertation contribute toward this space. During my time teaching in Guatemala for six months in 2011 (see the Prologue), children there reminded me that living with joy and wellness is not based solely on money, individual success, or making decisions considering future concerns. How might some of these insights influence pedagogical practice, so that students (and teachers) may be able to find genuine well-being on their life journey? By attending to these issues and considering views of wellness that are not predicated on external success alone, a greater understanding of children suffering from chronic unhappiness and even mental illness may be reached. By creating an imaginative space that has room for the authenticity and healing necessary in the specificity of particular moments, this work seeks to find a way to consciously acknowledge pedagogical relationships that may lighten the weight of neoliberal understandings of education (J. Seidel, personal communication, November 2013). While in no way proposing that schools primarily become places for healing or for therapy, this work suggests that teachers who are in daily contact with students may find value in seeing these young people first as humans with myriad needs, and only later as students with learning needs, as many teachers already do.

Approaching this work through a research sensibility informed by wisdom traditions provides the opportunity to articulate the vital role curriculum and pedagogy take in contributing

to the discussion of well-being by highlighting the importance of connection, community, and relationships, and the role of children in the midst of this. As Fidyk (2011) outlines, “to become compassionate entails our own individual confrontation with suffering and pain, the penetration of their meaning and an awakening to our interdependence and interconnection with all beings” (p. 159). Hence the pairing of my own stories alongside those of my participants. In this way, this work stems from the assumption “that a close examination of such visceral knowing, and of the life circumstances of being born into this world, bears the potential of becoming wise from within and through being in relation to others” (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012, p. xxiv). By sharing stories I seek to bring forth a deeper understanding of the connection between wisdom and well-being.

### **Way of Research: Imagining the World Differently**

The matters of theoretical frame and methodology have been difficult ones to sort out throughout this writing. Classical hermeneutics initially drew me with its deep and layered textual analysis. As outlined by Gadamer (1975/2004), hermeneutics asks questions such as “what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth?” (p. xx) when considering human experience. As a sensibility rooted in the human sciences (p. 8), it brings forth “a whole host of questions” (p. 9) rather than offering direct answers. While it offers a basis for interpretive inquiry, where my research lives, hermeneutics focuses greatly on historical connections, whereas my work seeks increased connections with the particular, current contexts of education.

Métissage, the braiding together of separate stories into dialogue with one another, has also influenced me. “Métissage is a way of speaking and acting that is both political and redemptive” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 9). It gives voice to many who had previously been silenced. “As a form of curriculum inquiry, métissage requires researchers to

craft pieces of autobiographical writing in which they research and teach themselves” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 9). While my research is rooted in political notions in its own way and has an autobiographical edge, I no longer find the primary home for my work in the sensibility of métissage since I am not directly weaving various perspectives. However, this sensibility of giving voice to my participants still guides many of my choices as a writer.

Métissage is the predecessor to life writing,<sup>10</sup> the methodology with which I end up moving forth. Life writing is a form of autobiographical writing that draws upon the self as a locus for writing, while maintaining links with place, circumstance, and current concerns with which we are faced. This writing is done not by remaining in the realm of the “I” alone but by engaging self-story with the broader life story simultaneously unfolding around us. Creating and including found poetry from portions of participant interviews, data in the form of stories from my field notes, and direct samples of student work honour the metaphoric as well as welcomes polyvocality. Following this sensibility of attending to the symbolic while attending to life as experienced by various individuals, I thus write *from* the lens of wisdom traditions, offering an embodied way of being that embraces the deep humanness of each individual.

While this work is interpretive, I do not name it hermeneutic writing with its complex philosophical tradition. And while I no longer claim métissage as the lead to writing, since this work lacks the braiding of distinct voices with a political undertone, I now claim life writing as my methodology (see Chambers et al., 2012). Wholeness itself is essential in enhancing depth and understanding of how students experience the ups and downs of their lives. By embracing the sensibility inherent to wisdom traditions and textually exploring concerns of mental health and

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<sup>10</sup> Life writing, as the methodology drawn upon for this work, is discussed in detail later in this chapter. It is further outlined by Cynthia Chambers, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Carl Leggo, and Anita Sinner in the opening of their book *A heart of wisdom: Life writing as empathetic inquiry* (2012).

well-being through life writing, it becomes possible to examine the multi-faceted underpinnings of wellness. Thus, what emerges upon these pages is at once an extremely personal and widely collective experience.

### **Life Writing: A Way to Express this Research**

Life writing is used in multiple contexts and in many ways, each of which honour the role of the researcher within the process of writing itself. It is a way of sharing stories in a manner that draws connections between lived experience and phenomena concurrently located in the world. I draw upon this methodology as a way to poignantly connect the broad current experience of mental health struggles and disconnection from self in the young with the particular stories of ten individuals (the student participants involved in the study).

This pedagogical work “constitutes a new reflective turn to the self—different from the egotistical, self-absorbed gaze that autobiographical writing can suffer from—one that focuses on serious introspection and close examination of one’s own and other’s natality” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xxiii). It is a research sensibility that provides the opportunity “for teachers and students to rethink and re-enact education as an empathetic endeavour as well as an intellectual one” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 370). As re-thinking and re-enacting education is a key endeavour of this research, life writing—my own, my participants, and created pieces emerging from participant voices—becomes a way to energize both personal and collective narratives.

Prescott (2012) explains that “as an umbrella term covering all kinds of autobiography and biography, life writing tends to favour narrative, although it can encompass other forms such as poetry, too” (p. 146). This dissertation includes both narrative and poetic accounts, in effect enacting “the activity of life writing... [as] a promising opportunity for exploration” in a way that “even changes in one’s way of being, going well beyond the institutionally-set academic goals”

(Prescott, 2012, p. 146). Life writing opens up exploration and possible change in self, rather than merely reporting what has already been established. English (2006), in drawing upon life writing as a way to understand leadership in education from a broad lens, outlines twelve main forms of life writing. These include biography, psycho-biography/theatre, autobiography, life stories, autobiographical treatises/extensions, portraits, portrayals, profiles, memoirs, diaries/letters/journals, prosopography, and obituary (pp. 146-147). This dissertation falls mostly in three categories. First, that of life stories, defined as “a form of autobiography often with a thematic cantering” (p. 146), shared here as personal and participant stories. Second, that of portrayals, which is “a written and detailed account of a specific episode or event in a person’s or persons life/lives” (p. 146), again drawing upon shared events in the research process. Third, diaries, letters, and journals, which are outlined as “short written passages which may be culled and woven into a larger narrative fabric” (p. 147), and those which I pull from my field notes, interview transcripts, student written responses, and my reflective journal writings surrounding the process of making data together.

In curriculum studies, Prendergast (2014) explains that “educational research has only relatively recently validated the practice of self-study, primarily through the development of *currere* and narrative inquiry, and more recently through the development of life writing” (p. 3). While she does not work or write in the realm of wisdom traditions, Prendergast emphasizes how life writing, in order to be effective, must not simply turn inward without connecting this gaze to the larger field of educational research. It is essential for research drawing on life writing to eventually turn outward and describe how it can affect educational policy, practice, and living. Life writing hones in on the particular as a way to say something of import for the larger concern of the wellness of our young. Accordingly, this research draws upon experiences in my own life and shares those of my participants as a recognition of “the important role that real-life

experiences play in helping writers overcome their fears and anxieties about writing” (Moore-Hart, 2006, p. 328). Life writing is not prescriptive, does not require one to follow an exact method of writing that “counts” as quality educational research. It is an opportunity to explore. As Richardson (1994/2000) states, “I write in order to learn something I didn’t know before I wrote it” (p. 517). For me, this holds true: the findings of this research shed light on the topic in ways I could not have fully expected. Through the act of writing and editing this final document, I have gained more insights about the disconnection from self and others (rooted in the consequences of colonialism) than I imagined. This disconnect is detailed further in Chapter Seven. Interactively, the very act of writing brings new revelations, new realizations, new ways of seeing and understanding the world and those within it.

As a storyteller, I hope to inspire listeners and readers “to examine the routes of their own interpretations—to see themselves implicated in the stories told—and make critical connections to teaching, learning, and public policy issues today” (Donald, 2011, p. 16). Life writing offers a way to envision more equitable, ecologically sustainable and just societies; a way to “redress the injustice that defines the world” (Pinar, 2009, p. 146) and to emphasize diverse narratives about childhood and well-being. This “mode of educational inquiry” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xix) allows a closeness to the participants that other styles do not permit. By honouring the voices of the children in the study, as well as my own, life writing warrants a humanness. It offers a way to touch on topics that might otherwise remain cold and distant. In this way of telling stories differently, life writing becomes an exercise in healing.

And so this research offers a bricolage: a mixture of life writing forms chosen for their poignant ability to speak to the very issues that they describe. Kincheloe (2001) describes bricolage in qualitative research as honouring complexity and multiple methods, where “research bricoleurs pick up the pieces of what’s left and paste them together as best they can” (p. 681; also

see Kincheloe, 2005). In this dissertation, at times bricolage reads as the sharing of stories, other times as portrayals of particular events or “data,” periodically as images and photographs, even others as journal entries or found poems. I write to share the stories of children, to express how it might be possible to be well in a way that considers the four-part person. How might transformation of our education system, *of ourselves*, be possible? As Brant (1994) states, writing is a “mysterious and magical act that brings possibility of transformation” (p. 120).

This approach to research—wisdom traditions as embodied through life writing—is drawn upon as a way to emphasize the inherent wisdom in sharing stories. In so doing, there is a “juxtaposing and mixing . . . [of] narratives [to] create a new text that is stronger and more complex than any of our individual stories. Every time we weave these texts, we act out our soul-full connectivity, hermeneutically and artistically” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 7). I seek to artistically connect the realm of the sacred to this work. By doing so in a non-prescriptive way, this presentation of “data” without pinning it down or defining it points to the roundabout nature of this approach to storytelling. Thus, rather than pointing out answers or directly stating best practices, I aim to provide space to dwell with the inherent struggles of life by acknowledging that “the solution may be in understanding the difficulty rather than trying to find a way to make it go away” (Chambers, 2003, p. 228). This acknowledgement of the importance of embracing difficulty rather than seeking to overcome it is inherent to wisdom traditions. In this vein, the next section outlines various research paradigms and highlights how this research fits in a worldview that honours the embodied connection between humanity and the sacred world around us.

## **Research Paradigms or Worldviews**

Research paradigms are a “set of underlying beliefs or assumptions about the nature of reality upon which research is based” (Fidyk, 2016). Understanding some basic premises of various ontologies, ways of being in the world, and cosmologies, ways of understanding the universe, allows us to see the emergence of varying worldviews. A basic understanding of the nature of reality that particular work is based upon is essential in all research. In this study, education is considered beyond the status quo of what *is*, and readers are encouraged to ponder what it *might be*. This research rests within an animated worldview, not in reaction to past injustices but rather by experiencing the world in its fullness: so much greater than the limited perspective often used to frame events, actions, and interactions (Fidyk, 2013). It is important at this juncture to briefly outline various research paradigms at play in order to articulate why an animated worldview, one that is spiral and not linear, is a suitable home for this work.

### ***Pre-modern Worldview***

Within the “traditional” or pre-modern paradigm, humans and nature existed within a fused consciousness. This perspective recognizes and appreciates the inherent link between humans and all other life, especially place. Abram (2010) describes it as “a new way of speaking, one that enacts our interbeing with the earth rather than blinding us to it” (p. 3). Here, a sense of “I” has not yet developed (outside of collective existence) within humans and the self-story is essentially the group story, connected to place, the elements, and surrounding creatures—a form of consciousness still evidenced among many traditional groups. Reliance was upon “traditions, rituals, ceremonies, and visions as ways of knowing” (Fidyk, 2017, p. 49). The pre-modern paradigm features a circularity of life and spirit imbues all (Fidyk, 2016). This research builds upon understandings in the pre-modern worldview (where all parts of life have an aliveness



within them), by contemplating the well-being and wholeness of children through understanding them as part of an interconnected web of relations (Fidyk, 2016).

### ***Modern Worldview***

The modern worldview (where there are absolute, objective, scientific capital-T Truths), values the rational mind and sensory perception above all else, particularly sight and observation (Fidyk, 2016). This paradigm involves a “separating out of humans’ interdependent relationship to family, clan, community, and place, away from spirits, gods, and ancestors” (Fidyk, 2017, p. 49). The rise of rationalism, different from the pre-modern worldview, detached humans from the natural world, separated mind and body, and positioned humans as “better than” nature, in effect elevating the rational mind over the physical body. With modernity came the rise of reason and thus a separating out of human consciousness, practiced via expansion, invasion, and colonization. Indeed, this separation can be seen as a necessary part of evolution, but not one to hold us captive. In this realm, objectivity, predictability, absolute truth (based on reduction and overriding laws), and the scientific method are valued above all else. This dominant patriarchal worldview arose during the Reformation, European Renaissance, and particularly the Enlightenment, when many countries set out to colonize the rest of the world, and carried on in many of the “newly-settled” locales. The legacy of Enlightenment with its privileging of his/stories continues to dominate many western countries and institutional structures. In Canada we see its stronghold in medicine, law, and education.

### ***Post-modern Worldview***

The post-modern paradigm holds central the reverence for individual and cultural uniqueness and the claim that there are no universals (Fidyk, 2016). In this worldview (where subjective, multiple truths are valued), in order to see the interconnections amongst all

perspectives and to hold space for each inclusively, knowledge is to be approached as “*understanding to be integrated into oneself*” (Fidyk, 2013, p. 386, italics in original). Post-modernity arose in reaction to modernity, thus spurring the hooked relationship between the two paradigms. Rooted in subjectivities—the voice of the other—multiple and contradictory individual stories were allowed to be heard once again (A. Fidyk, personal communication, winter 2012). Here, the ideas and stories of women, persons of colour and diverse race, LGBTQ2S+, and those with disability became valid, taking power through voice. Emotions, body, and affect are prioritized as ways of knowing, giving rise to contextualized knowledge and epistemologies such as feminism, identity theories, LGBTQ2S+ understandings and more. Nonetheless, as post-modernity directly emerged as a reaction to modernity (albeit perhaps not intentionally) via architecture, film, arts, and literary and philosophical criticism, it tends to remain focused on *responding* to the previous paradigm, mirroring much post-modern research in a perpetual “fight” of sorts, seeking to prove itself.

### ***Animated Worldview***

This research finds its home in the realm of an animated worldview, a term first employed by Fidyk (2013). In this research paradigm, the stance of “both/and” is required (A. Fidyk, personal communication, May 2015). Fidyk (2013) explains how “in an animated world, knowledge belongs to an interconnected cosmos, if knowledge can belong to any entity, and arises co-authored between it and the researcher/researched or a collective of researchers” (p. 386). The animated worldview holds ways of understanding the world from the lens of wisdom traditions. Also called an “integral paradigm” (Fidyk, 2017, p. 51), this worldview is different from modernity and post-modernity insofar as it values the realm of the unconscious, including bodily knowing, creative process, dreams, ancestors, animals, land, and synchronicity (Fidyk,

2016). Sharp, a Jungian analyst, defines the unconscious as “the totality of all psychic phenomena that lack the quality of consciousness” and writes that it “is both vast and inexhaustible. It is not simply the unknown or the repository of conscious thoughts and emotions that have been repressed, but includes contents that may or will become conscious” (Jung Lexicon, n.d., n.p. “unconscious”). When the unconscious is valued, the discussion about the well-being and wholeness of children is broadened as it considers more than merely meets the eye cognitively. In this animated paradigm, humans are seen as enmeshed in relationships the world over, and these connectivities guide understandings of the past, present, and future.

An animated worldview emerges from the previous paradigms, valuing what each contributes toward an ongoing evolution of consciousness. Whereas the post-modern paradigm focused on a multiplicity of separate identities, here, a new consciousness has broken through whereby some humans (with access to power) argue for a we-ness alongside an I-ness. In other words, re-connecting research back to life with spirit as experienced in pre-modernity, or consciously ensouling it. The animated paradigm acknowledges both absolute and relative truths, recognizing that all is connected (beyond mere human entities, as we are bound to place and creatures). In an animated worldview, there is no longer a hook antagonizing a reaction to past injustices, because the paradigm encompasses the “both/and” stance, where individual and collective, local and global, certain and uncertain, and Truths and truths are all held in a complex, constant flux with one another (Fidyk, 2016). Here there is an organic linking of the past, present, and future: spiraled time where an individual’s being is connected to something beyond the self. At once it is both personal and transpersonal, individual and communal. This something beyond the self has many names, including but not limited to Spirit, Divine, Creative Principle, God, Goddess, Gaia, Buddha Nature, Self, Creator, and Energetic Force. This creative energy is sacred.

## **Situating this Study in the Realm of the Sacred**

This recognition of the sacred is why I choose to ground this work in the tension of the unknown that is embraced by an animated worldview. Questions of well-being and wholeness have an inherent sense of the sacred in them, and if given the opportunity to dwell on these qualities, as I attempt to do here, the discussion shifts from being solution-focused to an expansion of consciousness and an interconnected sense of being/becoming. Accordingly, it becomes not only a reaction to the trials brought on by modernity, but another a way to frame questions of wellness.

Interconnection is a core principle of dwelling in a sacred way, and of honouring the world in an animated manner. The main concern that all of this work is in response to—the pervasive disconnect due to relationship denial as rooted in colonialist legacies—is linked to the consequences of colonialism that denied the importance of connection: with the natural world, with one another, and with ourselves. Much of the disconnection experienced by people today can be linked to a split from the sacred, which has also been promoted by patriarchy (a societal system where men primarily hold power). Zweig (1990), a Jungian-oriented therapist, offers a perspective on the masculine/feminine split that is prevalent in the modern worldview and its link to discussions of the sacred:

The costs of the one-sidedness of a patriarchal rule have been great. Many have linked it to the global ecological disaster we now confront, because it wrenched us away from a direct connection with the earth. With this primal split, several others followed: Women, previously linked to nature's ways, lost their instinctual powers and became subservient to men. The divine, previously linked to nature and the human body, was banished to the heavenly realms, leaving profane much that had been experienced as sacred. (p. 6)

The loss of the feminine—of ways that honour nature, relatedness, instinct, and creativity—is linked to a loss of the sacred. As nature is sacred, along with our connection to it, so too is nature inextricably linked to the feminine, its degradation connected to the degradation of the feminine. How might we develop consciousness in order to experience and so value these other ways of knowing and being, such as feminine consciousness rooted in an animated worldview? Consciousness grounded in our relational nature, care, love, bodies, emotion, and affect. Only then might there be any hope for the future of our planet as well as the individual and collective well-being of all its inhabitants.

By educating the young in ways that enable them to embody animated ways of knowing as part of a natural way of being in the world—knowing that arises from intuition, dreams, feelings, creative processes—this link to the sacred may be rekindled. More importantly, animated ways of knowing honour that which they have already experienced and many know as valid and valuable. As outlined earlier in this chapter, I am drawing upon many diverse wisdom traditions in this dissertation, and wish to acknowledge how grateful I am for the role these traditions have played in my own life. Wisdom traditions, including the Cree worldview of *nehiyawak*, or the four-part person, parallel an animated worldview. I am interested in and passionate about the animated paradigm as it offers a way to honour each of these traditions by outlining a common thread found throughout: that of interconnection.

As outlined, at times in this work I draw upon literature from depth psychology, a field rooted in an animated worldview. When considering a term such as “psychological growth,” I lean into the origins of the word *psyche*, which etymologically comes from the seventeenth century Latin and Greek meaning “the soul, mind, spirit; breath; life, one’s life, the invisible animating principle or entity which occupies and directs the physical body; understanding” (OED, n.d.). In this way, *psyche* encompasses all the aspects of being a four-part person: one

who is at once emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical. I heed Zweig's words (1990) that "psychological growth is a self-conscious process; it takes effort and intention to move ahead" (p. 2). This choice toward growth as a four-part person is not one that makes life *easier*, despite setting my intention and efforting to "achieve." Rather, I wonder if softening requires that I give up attempting so much and instead allow the feminine to lead me, a much worthier "achievement" at this point.

Seeking deep attunement to the sacred and to life itself, is no longer hooked into post-modernism, as it is not reactionary, but rather emerges from a need to honour my inner knowing or my true self. As articulated earlier, a main concern outlined in this dissertation is how many people in Eurocentric societies lack a connection with their own inner life. The first step in reconnecting is recognizing how colonization and patriarchy (with their focus on progress and achievement) trained us out of relying upon our inner guides to focus primarily on the outer realm. By clarifying here how a connection with one's inner life is linked to true self or core, the journey of reclaiming inner wisdom begins. I use the term "true self" as taught in Christian mysticism by Franciscan friar Richard Rohr (2003). In his audio series "True Self, False Self," he outlines in numerous ways the difference between one's true self and one's false self. False self, essentially, is rooted in ego which is the dressed-up version of self, and is "precisely what is not you" (35:04) at core, but rather the façade or personae we put on to face the world. True self, alternately, has no need to justify or prove itself, but is the part of self that contains genuine wholeness and is more concerned with substance than form (which tends to not be the norm in societies mired in colonialist logics). Nonetheless, as Rohr (2003) explains, we "need both, true self and false self. It's a dance. We just have an excess of false self because it's the only game in town for us" (47:35). True self, as I understand it, is not something sought externally but rather it

is settled into as we loosen our hold on worrying about how others view us and get comfortable with our inner muse.

I was drawn to this study because in my role as teacher I saw many students operating from false self, with seemingly minimal awareness of the existence of a true self. Thus, I sought to draw attention to the subtleties of life that might constitute a connection with their true selves. This was done in the project by providing a safe space and curated creative and somatic activities to support students in their exploration, as they were encouraged to get in touch with their inner wisdom. Over-reliance on neoliberal values, the final major concern that this dissertation explores, is detrimental to the growth of inner wisdom. An animated worldview, as a guiding influence in the writing of this dissertation, is not concerned with proving oneself or making generalizable claims (such as those incessantly propagated by Market Logic bound up in colonialism and patriarchy). Instead, insights from an animated worldview seek to guide readers to an understanding that there may be ways to contemplate educational issues and pedagogical concerns that are not mired in colonized, patriarchal paradigms.

### *Place as Sacred Being*

In many ways, current education with its focus on standardized tests, disproportionate documentation requirements, and accountability at the expense of relationality can be critiqued as lacking in animated qualities. One quality of living in an animated paradigm is that of honouring place as a sacred being; one that is alive. A main concern outlined in this dissertation is the warped sense of time and place in which many people are stuck. By honouring place as sacred, we come toward restoring our relationships with it in a way that brings vitality. Donald (2019), in articulating concerns about “a general curricular overlook of the intimacy and specificity of place to life and living” (p. 156), proposes that “becoming wisely aware to the unique animacy of

places is a good place to start” (p. 160). He writes about the need to tell different stories in order to do so. This research honours the sacredness of place (in rural Alberta) and the roots of each participant, and as such highlights the animated qualities of important places in their lives. As place is sacred, soul itself is a sacred place found within us. It is this embodied understanding that is central to this work. Place, like the land on which the student-participants lived and learned, is an embodiment of soul, of the creative principle itself.

This work has become a part of me, as described earlier in the story of the walk by the river with my supervisor. A further main concern addressed by this dissertation is that of the current Canadian school structure not being set up in a manner that honours the four-part person. When schools are over-focused on the “curriculum-as-plan” while forgetting the “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005a), the priority is the outer structure of life and not the inner development of those within it. We need both types of curriculum, yet are always leading out from within. Too often, in schools and beyond, adults tend to structure life (for ourselves and for children and youth) in such a way that does not allow a genuine depth of growth and learning to take place.

### **Moving from the Personal to the Collective**

The Protestant work ethic (which values efficiency, discipline, and productiveness) alongside patriarchal values of progress, hard work, and rationality controlled me for much of my life, and as such I am a recovering perfectionist. The addictive tendencies in me continue to slip out periodically, as I grew up believing that I was not good enough if I was not perfect. I could not be *me* because I sought for an ideal that was revered in the hard-working, God-fearing, success-focused culture I grew up in. At times, I still slip into this trap, and then try to gently pluck myself out. From personal experience, I now hold true what Woodman, as quoted in an



interview with Stromsted (2005), states: “where perfection is worshipped in consciousness, imperfection is magnetic in the unconscious. Splitting light from dark denies human wholeness” (p. 19). In other words, light and dark, like joy and grief, co-exist as two complementary states, together contributing to wholeness. Hence, my interest in exploring human wholeness with children emerged as a way to recognize the need for a full spectrum of experience in life.

One way wholeness can be approached is to consider a poignant example from patriarchal societies where the opposite has been practiced for centuries: the hierarchical arrangement of masculine ways being valued over all ways feminine. Unfortunately, feminine consciousness was forced underground with the rise of rationality (when the modern perspective took over from pre-modern understandings). Knowing that the feminine was intuitive, instinctual, and connected to nature, plants and creatures, it was no longer trusted or acceptable. This rationality privileged the external world based on sensory perception. As the eye was valued over the gut, observation as a way of knowing overpowered intuitive, instinctive ways. At this time in history, the attitude of exploration and conquering land and people was the new way of empowerment. While true that the rise of separating consciousness seems inevitable, it is only valuable as a phase. When *en vogue*, modernity split the light from the dark, valuing masculine qualities such as productivity, cognition, extroversion, and speed. This polarization firmly situated feminine qualities such as relatedness, bodily awareness, and unification beneath the surface, devaluing any culture who continued to value her ways. West (2007) offers insight here:

One consequence for the conquerors was a feeling of alienation from their own “natural” selves. Because they identified nature, women, and native people with instinct, passion, violence, idleness, and dreaming, they had to deny these parts of themselves and assert the primacy of commerce and practical reason. Most people today who live in Western countries have inherited this disconnect. (p. 10)

This disconnect continues as a consequence of colonialism, as the modern paradigm still has a firm grip on the collective psyche. This disconnect is especially evident in formal and informal means of education, subtly in some and more aggressively in others. The disconnect is evident in the ongoing violence toward Indigenous peoples, women, children, and the earth itself. Feminine instincts, passions, and dreams were thus denied by many (or alternatively secretly harboured, as one did not wish to appear weak or deluded). Separation from this natural full expression of being genuinely human has ongoing consequences. The relationship denial rooted in the legacy of colonialism affects everyone: the colonized *and* the colonizers. The ripple effects of this alienation, this disconnect, makes it difficult for us all—including educators and students—to find points of true connection, with ourselves and with one another.

This background understanding is key to learning why the feminine has been pushed underground in Eurocentric societies<sup>11</sup> with its legacy continuing throughout education today. In education, ignoring the feminine manifests as pedagogical interactions that are hierarchical, in which the “one who knows” bestows knowledge on the students, creating a passivity in the learner that takes learning and living life out of their hands. Further, patriarchal habits of mind focus on praising masculine qualities such as reason, the five senses, external observation, and business/commerce skills. Many schools focus primarily on these traits without also tending to and honouring feminine qualities such as intuition, creativity, feeling, internal reflection, and relational skills. This prioritizing of the external over the internal realm can lead to compartmentalizing children, leaving them adrift in a world lacking meaning and with little understanding of where to begin finding peace and purpose in life. When stuck in this worldview,

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<sup>11</sup> While I acknowledge that the feminine has been de-valued in other societies as well, this dissertation does not delve into discussions of this, as there is neither the time nor the space to do it justice.

we tend to alienate ourselves from our inner knowing—at times perpetuating this disconnect in children as well—and further drive underground all curative, creative potential.

While I do not wish to paint a picture of doom and gloom, this patriarchal mode of operating needs to be revealed for what it is: only half of the full picture of life. Living from this masculine, more unrelated half alone has grave repercussions, as it not only denies but also denigrates its related other. Viewing the world from this standpoint only is akin to wearing blinders that prevents one from seeing the complete panorama of life. This one-sided point of view not only has societal impacts, it affects the development of the individual psyche, which in turn leads to imbalanced growth and thus limited collective psyche development as well. Recall that psyche is akin to soul, meaning the “animating spirit” within (OED, n.d.). Whitmont (1982) discusses ongoing, far-reaching concerns with patriarchal “achievement,” outlining that “the price for this achievement was twofold: the loss of connection with the life-death continuum of existence; and the experience of self as a stranger in a senseless world” (p. 144). The experience of “self as stranger” resonates with much of my experience of disconnect, and makes me wonder how this might link to the rampant rates of mental health issues in our current society. How might children grow up where they do not face the “self as stranger” quite so tacitly, finding a way to connect their inner and outer experiences early on? One response may be by finding a link to feminine consciousness, for only by honouring the feminine does the masculine become related.

How might we embark on this journey of attunement—the exploration of the natural full expression of being genuinely human—both personally in our own lives and collectively in schools? Platek (2008) offers a starting point: “turning attention toward ourselves, nourishing and nurturing ourselves at a soul level, honoring and accepting the rhythms and needs of our own psyches and bodies” (p. 115). Connecting to our bodies in artful ways (such as through grounding in nature, creating works of art that emerge from a connection with soul, and dancing and moving

freely without being overly self-conscious) may provide inroads to celebrate the offerings of feminine consciousness, for all people.

I acknowledge that there is an entire field of educational research in curriculum studies best known as “embodied inquiry” (Snowber, 2016). While my work recognizes the importance of paying attention to the body (in addition to the other parts of being a four-part person) as a key finding of how educators can attend to the wholeness and well-being of children, I do not delve into the research of this particular field. This is due both to embodiment being part of the response to the initial question, rather than the core of the question itself, as well as recognizing that there already are many different key curricular voices at play in this work. In holding “embodiment” alongside “the sacred” in the title, I seek to draw increased attention to the importance of honouring the connection between the physical and spiritual aspects of being when discussing concerns of mental health and wellness.

Listening to our bodies—staying aware, attuned, and embodied—without trying to control them offers a way to soften. Instinct, imagination, and intention are key, each playing their role throughout development. As Zweig (1990) writes, “while the unconscious Feminine emerged through instinct, the Conscious Feminine unfolds through imagination. That means, this stage in human development is intentional” (p. 10). Accordingly, this research provided the opportunity for children to connect with their imaginative sides, encouraging them to creatively engage in guided visualization, art, and writing activities in an intentional way to assist them in discovering connections between the outer world and their inner self.

## **Embodiment**

The body is central to feminine ways of knowing that value the intuitive, instinctive, metaphoric, symbolic, affective, and imaginative realms. Too often, the body is exempt from

schooling altogether. A key shift for me, building upon understandings rooted in feminine consciousness, has been to no longer view the body merely as a vessel holding and seeking the soul, but rather as the soul's equal partner. I appreciate Woodman's articulation in her interview with Stromsted (2005), that "body work is soul work, and the imagination is the key for connecting both" (p. 19). What might this work, this connection, look like in the lives of our young?

Personally, my body offers messages all the time, yet these often go unheeded. However, when I listen, it becomes clear that the body knows well in that moment and that I should pay heed. Through my yoga teacher training and advanced studies toward becoming an art therapist, I was continually reminded of the importance of being aware of my body's needs. As Platek (2008) states, "all the head knowledge in the world can't match the sheer vibrancy and power of our own animal" (p. 110). Here, Platek refers to animal as one's innate bodily connection, which, from a Jungian perspective, is feminine in nature. Healthy feminine power emphasizes process over product, relatedness over separation, arises from care-ful paying attention, embodied and attuned to what is going on in the present moment. Zweig (1990) describes it thus: "this process-orientation involves presence in the body—in this moment—a full emotional and sensory acuity, a permission to follow one's bodily experience, rather than to listen to thinking alone" (p. 9). If the body is to be given her rightful place in feminine ways of knowing and being in the world, she cannot constantly defer to the brain, asking the masculine values for permission to speak. No, she needs to become strong and firm in her own knowledge, in her own way, while working together with reason. This work recognizes that the body and mind are always united. If we ignore the body, we will have to reckon with our choices, as the title of van der Kolk's (2014) ground-breaking research suggests: *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*.

The body is a tangible expression of that which occurs via the psyche, or soul. The two must meet, must work together in order for wholeness to emerge. In this light, it is beneficial for masculine and feminine energies to be viewed in tandem, as this allows for well-being and development in a more mature way. Zweig (1990) states: “if a person is aware of both the Masculine and Feminine poles, then there is a harmonious dynamic within the psyche. As a result, a fuller development of a wide range of capacities becomes possible” (p. 9). This harmonious dynamic may be evident in educators who, for example, are relational while teaching new and complex concepts. The purpose of connecting with the feminine aspect of the body is not to deny the masculine energy in the form of thought or abstraction, but rather to bring into balance the importance of both, as with both ways of knowing and not-knowing, and doing and not-doing. Just as we need both strength and flexibility in the yogic position Goddess pose, we can be more complete when drawing upon both masculine and feminine energies in a holistic manner. Educators who are able to balance both of these energies well are better able to meet students where they are at, in all of their complexities as four-part people.

Schools—and all who work in them for multiple hours each day—and the field of curriculum and pedagogy itself, find themselves in “constraining times” that are “afflicting the educational spaces of the young and those who teach them” (Seidel & Jardine, 2016b, p. 5). Education as a whole is under pressure from “the current corporate agenda to standardize education and thereby take the soul out of it” (Mayes, Grandstaff, & Fidyk, 2019, p. 2). Schools are inflicted with panic where all “kinds of suffering” (Seidel & Jardine, 2016b, p. 8) are experienced by all kinds of people—young ones and adults alike. Much of this suffering can be equated to an imbalance of masculine and feminine ways of being, and in the case of this work, of being in schools. When standardization is the gold standard for learning and where memorization of facts alone becomes idolized, catastrophe ensues (Mayes, Grandstaff, & Fidyk,

2019). These same authors and educators write “that it is in loving and lively interaction in the classroom that true learning occurs. Such interaction is precisely what standardized education works to erase because it is too ‘messy’ and completely unmeasurable” (p. 136). Standardized ways of operating in schools are rooted in masculine ways alone, which emphasize productivity, efficiency, and speed at the expense of relatedness. When feminine ways are not honoured and masculine attributes are over-glorified, it leads to isolation between people and also alienation from self. Seidel and Jardine (2016a) write that “this isolation is a deliberate by-product of industrial and managerial schemes and . . . it is *profoundly anti-pedagogical* at its root” (p. 3, emphasis in original). Any schemes in education that are anti-pedagogical are understandably alarming. When educational institutions become “social fuel in the process and power of a society” (McEady, 2009, p. 53), questions must be asked. Some of the repercussions of over-focusing on masculine ways alone are an “obsess[ion] with measurement” (Meyer, 2009, p. 20) and that students do not see themselves in what it is they are learning (p. 22). All of this points to the fact that “the problems children face are not a product of our schools but of our society at large” (Mayes, Grandstaff, & Fidyk, 2019, p. 2).

In light of contemporary education’s struggles with balancing feminine and masculine ways, I wonder if a curricular turn to the body, the heart, a more feminine focus overall might fill the vocational void experienced by many educators and the educational void felt by many students. McEady (2009) writes that currently in many schools, “creativity, cultural responsiveness, learner-centeredness, and spirituality are in absentia” (p. 55). On the other hand, Moore (2009) articulates what an education of the soul might look like: “a sense of home, intimacy, stillness, adventure without experience, the dance of relationship” (p. 13). Similarly, Seidel and Jardine (2016a) invite educators and scholars in the field of curriculum and pedagogy to consider that absolutely “*everything* is teaching us” (p. 1). When we have faith in this animated

worldview, we realize that this way of knowing and being indeed invites the feminine into the classroom. To highlight the necessary working together of both masculine and feminine energies in the realm of curriculum and pedagogy, I turn to the ideas of Moore (2009) once again. He writes that “learning is a kind of movement, a dance, a partnership in which certain kinds of love can keep learning alive” (p. 11). As partners, feminine and masculine energies can keep life and learning in healthy motion where tension is enlivening. Loving and dancing are both actions that come alive even more when not experienced in isolation. They require the feminine qualities of relatedness. If learning is loving, if learning is dancing, then it is life-giving. This is what I mean when I propose that the field of education is enhanced when it is rooted in a worldview that holds the full spectrum of emotion, feeling, sensation, imagination, and experience within its hands. Considering all of this within educational settings makes it possible to envision a more well-rounded and complete journey of education for the young in our midst, allowing schools to become places where they experience wholeness and well-being.

### **A New Ethic**

In his 2003 text *The truth about stories*, Thomas King writes: “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (p. 164). With this counsel as my guide, I highlight the unique approach I took in this research project as a way to demonstrate how ethics guided all of the decisions made throughout. Adhering to the guidelines set by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta was only a starting point. Moving beyond a traditional understanding of ethics in a dissertation, researching from within an animated paradigm implies not only different ways of knowing, but also different values and ethics that are inherent in the very research design. Holding the four-part person central in the educational encounter means that the guide to this work is one of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008).



Wilson's text *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods* (2008) offers a guide for how I approached my work. He states that in an Indigenous axiology, "What is more important and meaningful is fulfilling a role and obligations in the research relationship—that is, being accountable to your relations" (p. 77). Axiology is the ethics and values that one brings to life and work, and a basic definition of ethics is "the values that sustain and guide us through difficult situations" (Becker, 2004, p. 19). Some of my sustaining values are those of accountability to others as well as being true to myself. The word ethics originates in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century as *ethik*, the "study of morals" and from the Greek *ethikos*, "ethical, pertaining to character" (OED, n.d., "ethic"). The very character of this study was to be accountable to my relations, particularly the student participants. As the researcher, I worked hard to ensure that my own ethics were evident in my professional and personal character. Wilson outlines that the key features of relational accountability are "respect, reciprocity and responsibility" (p. 77; see also Weber-Pillwax, 2001). Here, I expand on these key terms in direct connection with my study.

While relational accountability as outlined by Wilson (2008) is particular to Indigenous research methods, it is a way of being and relating to others that is consistent throughout all wisdom traditions. All of the wisdom traditions that inform this study together hold this ethic, as well as individually uphold it within their particular worldviews. For example, ethics can be considered "an exploration of 'right relationship.' This idea of 'right relationship,' comes from Buddhist thought . . . . It is similar to the Christian Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" (Becker, 2004, p. 22). Guided by accountability to another, the work is held to a standard that honours fellow beings at every juncture. In this study, relational accountability was evident through the long-term relationships built with children during the weekly interactions within the classroom setting for the four months prior to the official start of the research project. I built trust and relationality by being a regular part of their world for the

entire school year. By being accountable to them in this way, relationality became central to the research that we undertook together as a group. This was one way that I embodied what researching in an ethical manner that honours the four-part person looks like.

Respect is the first key feature of relational accountability. I was able to respect the research participants as well as all of their relations through the methods I used in the study. As evident in Chapter Five, this work was based upon many discrete yet overlapping methods (how data was approached, made, collected, analyzed, and expressed), all of which honoured the four-part personhood of each of the participants. By gathering data in many different ways such as student artwork, written work, Sharing Circles, and individual interviews, I was able to respectfully engage them through various approaches that spoke to their individual strengths. Naturally, I felt responsible to honour them as people, not simply as contributors to/of data. I approached the work as an “opportunity for relational renewal and enhanced understanding” (Donald, 2013, n.p.), which is what Donald proposes as a healthy way for educators to engage with Aboriginal perspectives, and all interactions.

Another defining aspect of relational accountability is that of reciprocity (Wilson, 2008). Noddings (1984) writes about this in her text *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, articulating that the ethical relationship between “the one-caring and the cared-for are reciprocally dependent” (p. 58). As outlined earlier, this study focused not only on the well-being and wholeness of the student participants, but also of me as researcher. This secondary feature was not initially planned for, but grew out of the reciprocity that was inherent in our interactions. Further, Noddings expresses that “when we behave ethically as ones-caring, . . . we are meeting the other in genuine encounters of caring and being cared for” (p. 175). This study felt like an ongoing experience of “meeting the other,” as she outlines. When considering reciprocity in the design of a research study, Wilson (2008) suggests to ask “What am I contributing or giving back

to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal?” (p. 77). In this study, I provided the student participants the space, time, and openness to experience and embody what being well as a four-part person feels like. I gave them opportunities to connect with their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves. By together creating a sacred realm within the school building, I shared with them a way of being that opened up possibilities for growth and learning, personally and collectively.

The final piece of relational accountability is responsibility. A question that I asked myself throughout this research was “Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to the other participants, to the topic and to all of my relations?” (Wilson, 2008, p. 77). This responsibility cannot be taken lightly, as the obligations are many and the implications are vast. I feel like I was responsible in my interactions with each of the participants throughout, as I remained rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness (Noddings, 1984, p. 2). Regarding my responsibility to the topic and to all of my relations, I took my lead from Becker (2004), who writes that “the term *ethical* refers to a specific internal attitude that a person brings to a particular situation” (p. 22). My internal attitude to the topic as well as to my relations remained open, heartfelt, and fluid. This provided me as the researcher with the opportunity to responsibly lead from the heart. As Becker outlines, “The Heart is the seat of conscience, understanding, forgiveness, grace, and our ethical attitude; it is the place of dialogue” (p. 15). In each of my interactions (with my participants, the topic, and my relations throughout), I focused on this dialogue as a way to embody responsibility and an ethical attitude as a whole. Dialogue invites openness, as it cannot be approached from a fixed standpoint.

By telling the story of this research in a way that is different from many others, I seek to embody a different ethic, as Thomas King suggests. The distinction is that research conducted within an animated paradigm is designed with a different ethic at core. This ethic is “based upon

maintaining relational accountability” (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). The crux (and title) of Wilson’s book is that *Research is ceremony*, which he explains thus: “The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves” (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). Approaching research from the sensibility of wisdom traditions and expressing it in the form of life writing offers ways for research practices to support the building of stronger relationships—with others, with our cosmos, and with ourselves. The ethics of relational accountability, then, that prioritize respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, display values at the heart of an animated worldview.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CURRICULUM STUDIES, ANCESTORS, HOLISTIC PEDAGOGY

North. South. East. West. Sky.  
Connect. Map. Undo. Re-map.  
To locate yourself.<sup>12</sup>

### Living Holistically: Getting Personal<sup>13</sup>

*I grew up on a farm. Our home was surrounded by acre upon acre of sown fields—quite literally for as far as the eye can see. Living in the flat prairies of southern Manitoba, the expansive sky held a full range of emotions—from the soft glow of sunrise to the dazzling colours of sunset, from the fluffy full clouds slowly drifting by to the torrential downpours that you could watch coming all across the horizon, from the starry nights boasting bright constellations to the gentle flutter of the florescent northern lights. My family grew many crops: wheat, barley, canola, flax, soybeans, oats. My dad watched both the markets and the quality of the soil each year when choosing what to plant and where. As a youngster, I enjoyed many a tractor and combine ride. A highlight each harvest was using the grain truck as my personal playground: the back brimming with a fresh load of grain, I would be a gymnast as I flipped around the stabilizing bars or struck a pose as I allowed my body the freedom of fully releasing into the tiny particles of often-itchy grain. It was divine. We would have family picnics out in the field from the back of the half-ton, stamping down the stubble and chaff to find a suitable location to lay the patchwork blanket that Grandma had sewn for us. Throughout adolescence and early adulthood, I worked as a hired hand alongside my Dad and my Opa, both in the barns and out on the fields.*

*Much as I loved country life, ever since I can remember I yearned for more. Something bigger, better. Something out there that was bound to hold all that life can offer. I wanted to be a “town kid” who could ride my bike on actual pavement, not dusty gravel, and who could hang out with friends after school and have the convenience of walking to the corner store to buy a slurpee. No such luck. As early as age seven, I can recall being embarrassed by my life: from the old, practical farm house we lived in, to my mom who didn’t work outside the home, to our staunchly Protestant Christian beliefs, to the simplicity of life as I knew it. It was never exciting enough for me. I longed for something more. Fast forward into adulthood: an Education degree, a Master’s in Education, moving from one Canadian city to the next—never a small town!—travelling around the world, always searching for what life had to offer, always running farther and farther from the farm; from my roots.*

*Enter a move to Edmonton, working toward my PhD, taking a Holistic Learnings class from Professor Dwayne and Elder Bob. One clear, crisp Saturday during class Bob instructed us to go outside to search for a “found object.” Anything that might speak to us about what it may mean to live holistically. I bundled up and headed west on foot with only my thoughts for company. Elder Bob’s learning lodge is located in a stand of trees with farmland all around. I set*

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<sup>12</sup> I created this haiku poem and many of the ones I follow in this section from notes taken during the Holistic Approaches to Learning class with Elder Bob Cardinal and Professor Dwayne Donald in fall 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Excerpts of the stories shared in this section began as part of a group métissage presentation at the Provoking Curriculum Conference at the University of British Columbia, BC, in February 2015. Parts are published in the Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS) (see Latremouille, Bell, Kasamali, Krahn, Tait, & Donald, 2016).

*out for a grove west of the barren field, envisioning that I would find a significant object among the stately deciduous beings. As it was shortly after harvest, the field was full of chaff and fallen stalks of wheat that the combine had missed. I trampled on over this, oblivious to its beckoning. I approached the periphery of the stand of barren trees, hoping for something to speak to me. To find me. Nothing did. My feet shuffled along, kicking at the brush and avoiding the barbed brambles the best I could. This bush, these trees... they had nothing to say to me except, "turn around." I looked back over the golden expanse of the rutted field toward Elder Bob's land and the welcoming lodge. I glanced down at my feet and saw for the first time what had been there in front of me all the while.*

*Bearded wheat, found in small, trampled clusters next to tire tracks from large machinery and excrement from the hordes of geese gorging on the leftovers. It was my turn to gather some of this sustenance, at last. My excitement grew as I picked up stalk after stalk of left-behind wheat. I began to create a wheat bouquet, bunching the pieces together aesthetically and tying them with an extra-long stem. I did not yet know the significance of this object; I only knew that it felt right. It found me. Upon reaching the lodge, sheaves of wheat nestled in my arms, I made myself comfy in my seat, pulled out my notebook, and wrote a couple of lines about my experience. I felt somewhat possessive of the wheat, guarding that which now revealed itself to me anew with such vigor that it caught me off guard. As the whole group reconvened to share briefly about the objects that we found—reframed as "those that found us"—I was overcome by emotion: it finally hit me that I have been turning away from my roots for so long. I recognized how I had framed my upbringing as "simple and stupid." Those words that fell out of my mouth hit me hard: simple and stupid. I have been pushing away the family values, Protestant beliefs, and connection with the land for most of my life. Now, this wheat is demanding something of me. It is calling me to pay attention. Both personally and professionally, it is beckoning me to live life more fully, more holistically. To not search for life in all places foreign, but to be willing to sink into my roots as I acknowledge the role my past has played in making me who I am today. To stop rushing from one thing to the next. To honour this way of life, to see how it speaks to me and how I might respond to it. Listen. Receive. Dwell.*

## **Holistic Approaches to Learning: A Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiry**

For me, life has become a sort of self-study. Not in a self-absorbed manner, but rather by recognizing that my choices and way of being affect others and the world around me, and vice versa. We are very evidently interconnected. Everyone has a past that affects their present and guides their future, whether or not they are consciously attuned to it. For me, it took a long while to recognize that I was always moving on to seek out the next exciting thing without fully appreciating the value in where I was and in what I was doing. This call to pay attention is clear: how might we each more fully wake up to our lives and in turn recognize our own inherent value? As educators, a vital role is to support our students on their journey of self-discovery. I

share my own stories as a way to bring particularity to the broader claims that I make with the hopes of shedding light on how our very individual, human struggles offer a way to relate to and connect with others by hearing about their life experiences. Perhaps this is a way that we can make sense of some of the unknowns around us. In the context of this research, self-study was conducted in an informal manner prior, during, and after each week with the students. As my own memories and sensations emerged, I gave them space and wrote through them in my research journals to provide context for what I witnessed in both myself as well as in the student participants.

For most of my childhood, I struggled with many of the main concerns that I outline in this dissertation. My own experience is what led me to the passions I now hold dear, as the very act of personal reflection and contemplation has allowed me to learn from my own life what I can best offer the young with whom I work. For example, I struggled with listening to my inner voice for guidance, regularly seeking approval and direction from outside of myself. I spent a lot of my childhood obsessed with time, literally waiting for the day when I would be all grown up. This yearning made it difficult to be fully present and attentive to my life as it was. These experiences are part of what led me to do this work with children, as a way to support them on their life's journey, and perhaps reclaim some of my own through this conscious attention. In effect, this work encourages children to be fully present to their own reality in their own time and to tune in to their inner guides as a way to find some direction.

### ***Loving the Questions***

*Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart...*

*Try to love the questions themselves...*

*Do not now seek the answers, which can not be given  
because you would not be able to live them –  
and the point is to live everything.*

*-Rilke (in Hart, 2001, p. 120)*

How might each of us live in the midst of all that is unresolved in our own hearts? Why might this be of utmost importance? Eppert (2010) suggests that “by directing our attention to this internal war, we might begin to clarify our ethical and spiritual responsibilities to our children” (p. 220). These responsibilities, if taken up by educators, would influence the well-being of students on multiple levels. Jardine (in Smith, 1999) outlines how this is not “ethics-as-rules-and-regulations” but rather an attempt “to invoke something of the notion of *ethos* as the characteristic spirit of a people, a place or a community” (p. xvii). As educators, our ethical responsibility to our students is to attend to their *ethos*, which includes character, disposition, customs, and habits (OED, n.d.). Attending to the health and wellness of the young in our midst is essential for their personal growth and development, particularly in learning to see themselves as the complete beings that they are already, with an active outer and inner life and with important qualities to contribute to their communities and relations.

In the context of this work, I use the overarching term mental wellness to describe interest “in a more positive, spiritual, and visionary approach to mental health,” as outlined by Buddhist philosopher Jack Kornfield (2009, p. 5). In this way, mental wellness encompasses much more than mental health, which may over-simplify the definition. I view mental wellness as containing the emotional, spiritual, physical, and psychological needs required for life and living well. This understanding takes both joy and suffering into consideration, and recognizes the need for the whole spectrum of emotion and experience in a whole and complete life. As Fidyk (2011) explains,

Suffering, a condition inherent to being human and experienced in multiple forms in our schools, is seen as a problem – something to avoid, annihilate, deny, repress – and is often treated with behaviour modification or pharmaceuticals. Rather than looking at our



“humanness” where disease, sadness, illness and death are “normal” natural conditions; they are seen as states that need correction. (p. 132)

Here, Fidyk conceives of suffering as a natural condition of human life. As a fundamental teaching of Buddhism, this ethic of suffering underlies this work without being discussed directly in a philosophical manner. Rather, by hearing from children in the research study how it is that they face the emotional and spiritual pain in their lives so that they are able to live in a state of wellness (through acknowledging the existence of their suffering and not suppressing it), this work seeks to ethically articulate our pedagogical living together. An increased understanding of the myriad factors at play in the lives of children will not only contribute toward interactions between educators and students, and further extend outward to all creatures, but may also shed light on how adults may experience enhanced wellness by being attuned to the rhythmic nature of both suffering and joy.

### **A Call for Holism**

Elder Bob teaches that people can stay true to their centre by paying attention in multi-sensory ways, known in Cree as *wâskamisiwin* (B. Cardinal, personal communication, October 25, 2014). To me, this multi-sensory attention equates to being holistic. In this work, I use the term holism to mean being attentive as a four-part person, inwardly and outwardly. Offering attention in multi-sensory ways, *wâskamisiwin*, is a means of staying true to one’s centre. In classroom practice this might look like inviting students to ask themselves “what’s missing?” in any given moment. This question, proposed by Elder Bob, might offer clarity as a way to connect with particular needs that may be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. To echo Wilson’s (2008) work, I propose that holism is about relationality: acknowledging “the world around us [and within us] as a web of connections and relationships” (p. 77). By acknowledging that the

circle (of the Medicine Wheel, of the base of the teepee, of the interconnections between the four directions) symbolizes life itself (B. Cardinal, personal communication, September 27, 2014), holism implies living relationally: with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us. As articulated in an earlier section clarifying Elder Bob's understandings of balance, a key message he shares is that balance in the outer world depends upon people finding balance within (B. Cardinal, personal communication, November 22, 2014). Again, balance is not a static concept but an ongoing, elusive struggle that we continually strive toward.

A call for holism comes from Elder Joe Cardinal, written through the work of Hoffman (2010) and evoked by the extent of disconnection in the lives of many North Americans. He writes, "a 'racing mind' creates a life that is rushed. Through this state of being in a constant rush people can become disconnected from their work, and their loved ones, and over time they become disconnected from themselves" (pp. 28-29). This disconnection is mired in the legacy of relationship denial brought about through colonialism. Further, "racing" links back to two of the sub-concerns this dissertation addresses: having a skewed sense of time due to being overly busy, thus contributing to not turning inward to learn, grow, and connect. Such ways of living demonstrate a lack of connection to one's inner life as well as to the sacred. Disconnection—in the lives of students we work with and perhaps in our own lives—leads to a disembodied way of being. Being disembodied implies a forgetting of the body, which in turn implies a cutting off from our wisdom as four-part people. This lack of connection is evident in myriad ways: from young children glued to games on hand-held screens to youth communicating through electronic gadgets at the expense of face-to-face relationships to adults who would rather binge-watch entire series of TV shows than face the stresses of their lives. Without discrediting the need to relax or be alone at times, a concern arises when people do not know what brings them wholeness or

continuously consciously choose to distract themselves from reality, ignoring their inner personalized core or their outer support networks. I, too, am implicated in this.

One way that I have found to address some of these concerns is by acknowledging the realm of the sacred in order to “restore life to its original difficulty” (Jardine, 1992a). As discussed in Chapter Three, these complex issues can be approached openly and inquisitively by recognizing the interconnected ways in which we are all linked in an animated worldview. Rather than try to quickly problem solve or make sweeping policy changes, dwelling in the sacred invites us to thoughtfully contemplate the sources of the concerns and possible ways of moving forward. We both have and do not have the ability to purposefully make changes. Hoffman (2010) articulates this dichotomy:

Though we exist in an astronomically immense, interrelated realm, that is simultaneously physical and spiritual, as individual beings we can affect our personal future through our cognitive choices and our actions. Our lives are not entirely predetermined by either physical or spiritual forces. Nor are we in complete control of the outcomes of our lives. (p. 25)

There is something greater at work in lives both personal and collective, into which we each might surrender as a starting point toward wholeness and well-being. There is also personal agency, through which we may choose not to rush around as much and instead experience quality over quantity; depth rather than breadth alone. Holism is a call to find depth in these multiple aspects of being a four-part person. Inherently, holism implies wholeness, which when considered in the context of the four parts of each of us, requires a depth of character that is willing to consider the sacredness that guides life both inner and outer.

Many contemporary educators thoughtfully consider how best to teach the outer aspects of functioning well in the world. Unfortunately, many people in educational settings place little

attention on the inner lives of students, not knowing how to best support their development as four-part people. This manifests as a disconnect that many students feel between their lives as lived on a daily basis and a planned curriculum that is primarily focused on knowledge and understandings<sup>14</sup> (Alberta Education, 2005). Too often, we as educators focus on the knowledge and understandings outcomes, sidelining the values and attitudes outcomes and paying little attention to the various skills and processes outlined in provincially-mandated Programs of Studies, as discussed further in the next section.

Consider Aoki's (2005a) distinction between the planned curriculum and the lived curriculum. He outlines at length the necessary "tensionality that emerges, in part, from indwelling in a zone between two curriculum worlds: the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experiences" (p. 159). Healthy tensionality *requires* both worlds. Holistic education finds its home amidst the lived curriculum, expressed as values and attitudes and embodied through the skills and processes that students embark on. As Sir Ken Robinson (2008) emphasizes in his video about changing educational paradigms, the issue is not that many teachers want schools to be overly focused on the knowledge and understandings at the expense of the other outcomes, but rather that these approaches are deeply rooted in the very design of schools and schooling as we know it. This hearkens back to another of the main concerns that this dissertation addresses: current school structures are built upon foundations that no longer match the realities of students' lives. I wonder how the culture of schools might be changed more holistically by attending to some of these underlying necessary structural changes in schools as we know them.

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<sup>14</sup> Knowledge and Understandings, Values and Attitudes, and Skills and Processes are the headings used to outline the various types of outcomes found in Alberta Education's Programs of Studies across the subject areas.

### ***Disconnected Curricular Content***

The process of educators focusing primarily on outcomes related to knowledge and understanding, while sidelining other important learning objectives connected to the values and attitudes and skills and processes that students are also expected to learn, may be done consciously by some and unconsciously by others. In Alberta, where I currently work within a public school system, all of the curricular outcomes for each subject area are organized overall as values, skills, and understandings in the provincial Programs of Study (see Alberta Education, 1996, 2000, 2005<sup>15</sup>), the knowledge outcomes being grouped with the “understandings.” As further articulated by curriculum scholars later in this chapter, teaching cannot be about the *what* alone, but also about the *why* and the *who* (see Greene, 1971/2009 & 1988; Noddings, 2009; and Whitehead, 1929). Educators would do well to ensure that their students see themselves in the content as well as are able to make connections with why the subject matter matters.

Davis (2004) dedicates an entire book to exploring various inventions of teaching, and his ideas shed light as to why the current field of education is primarily concerned with content. He writes, “that what teaching *is* only makes sense when the issue is considered alongside prevailing assumptions about identity, learning, schooling, and so on” (Davis, 2004, p. 2, emphasis in original). Given this reality, then it becomes necessary “to unravel some of the conceptual commitments” (p. 5) in order to gain clarity on what it is that educators are committed to in our teaching practice. Davis does so in his text, outlining a genealogy of the various approaches to teaching and learning that are employed in our North American school systems. While there is not room to expand on these various inventions of teaching at this time, I wish to highlight

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<sup>15</sup> As another example, in Manitoba, the province where I completed my pre-service education degree, the curricular outcomes in each subject area are organized into those related to Skills and Competencies, and Knowledge and Values. The amount of Knowledge outcomes far exceed any of the others in all of the curriculum documents I explored for that province (see Manitoba Education and Training, 2000; 2019; and Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003).

certain key findings from his concluding chapter that shed light on some of the concerns that I have outlined here, primarily regarding how many educators are overly committed to teaching the content outcomes at the expense of the objectives that support students in becoming four-part people. Davis (2004) outlines that “arguments tend to swirl around the specific curriculum topics that should be covered, the levels of proficiency that should be demonstrated, and the classroom structures that are more or most effective” (p. 180). This focus is limiting in scope because of the lack of connection to the emotional and spiritual aspects of being. Davis (2004) goes on to argue that “such fundamental contrivances as prespecified learning objectives and formal lesson plans do not fit with embodied understandings of learning” (pp. 181-182). To continue this train of thought, then, many current educational structures do not support embodied ways of learning.

As related to this study, the concern here is that many educators likely feel ill-equipped to teach outcomes that are less concrete (those related to values, attitudes, skills, and processes). In part this is due to the disconnect rooted in relationship denial that is perpetuated in many pre-service teaching programs and in-service schools. Others too may not believe in the value of curriculum as wisdom or inquiry-based learning, perhaps due to values held in the modern paradigm, personal bias, or simply not being informed. When we as educators lack clarity and confidence in how we can best teach the more affective outcomes alongside the knowledge-based ones, the growth of our students as four-part-people is negatively affected. Schwab, and curriculum theorists expanding upon his work such as Clarke and Erickson, outline the “crucial role of teacher as an active creator of knowledge as opposed to a passive transmitter of pre-determined curriculum outcomes” (Clarke & Erickson, 2004, p. 205). While I echo the hope of these authors that educators “critically reflect upon [our] beliefs and actions” (p. 205), I know from personal experience that many of us often get too caught up in scrambling to “get through” the curriculum each year (by emphasizing the knowledge and understanding outcomes) instead of

fully being implicated by the outcomes related to values, attitudes, skills, and processes. How might we ensure that we “are active constructors of curriculum” (p. 205) with and for our students, by shifting to an animated paradigm that honours the four parts of students within our lessons? If we educators are rooted in relationality and are active constructors in this way, then we can draw upon our professional judgement and knowledge of our particular students’ needs in order to focus on the more embodied outcomes.

Classrooms that are not so mired in predetermined ways of focusing primarily on outcomes related to knowledge and understanding “might open new spaces of possibility—a proposition that is utterly incompatible with the ends-oriented, test-driven culture of modern schooling” (Davis, 2004, p. 183). Davis concludes by emphasizing that the field of education would benefit from shifting its focus to what teaching and learning *might be*, not emphasizing “what *is*, but on what might be brought forth” (p. 184, emphasis in original). The problem with focusing on what currently *is* alone, is that it is static and not changing, and rooted in fear rather than openness. Moore (2009) captures this well:

Contemporary education is led in large part by anxiety: worry about children making it in the world, having a profession or trade, keeping up with competing nations, staying abreast of changes in knowledge and culture, and making enough money. What if we were to shed those anxieties and think positively about education, about helping our children become who they were born to be and to make a unique contribution to society? (p. 15)

Moore and other scholars write about the ways in which we might “restore spirit (or soul) to the matter of teaching” (McEady, 2009, p. 54). It is by focusing more teaching on the skills and processes as well as values and attitudes that students might experience the true spirit of learning in an embodied way. Drawing upon wisdom traditions, such as the Cree worldview of

*wâskamisiwin* (paying attention in multi-sensory ways), offers educators new ways to connect with students.

The concerns laid out in this research have become concerns precisely because of how they affect the lives of children and youth. Young people who have experienced trauma, mental health concerns, or even a diagnosed mental illness may be armoured, defended, and/or split off from their genuine sense of self. Initially this was a self-protection response, a means for survival. By shifting to a more relational way of being in schools, educators and healthcare practitioners might support students in learning how they can safely explore more life-giving responses when faced with difficulty.

Paying attention.  
Shapes of knowing and knowledge.  
Personalize it.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Holistic Education or Holistic Pedagogy?***

How might educators support the holistic growth of children that authentically honours their inner being? Many foundational curriculum scholars have been contemplating such questions for a long time, and offer important insights for educators and pedagogues. Smith (1999) pens: “young people want to know if . . . life itself has a chance” (p. 139). Noddings (1984) identifies the importance of “affective relation” (p. 171) in ethical and moral education. Jardine (2012a) writes about “raising ourselves up out of thoughtlessness and the stifling confines of an unexamined life” (p. 93). These scholars, and more, have inspired me to focus on the wellness of children from a lens rooted in wisdom.

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<sup>16</sup> This poem was created from notes taken during the Holistic Approaches to Learning class with Elder Bob Cardinal and Professor Dwayne Donald in Fall 2014.



It is difficult to come up with a standard, agreed-upon description of “holistic education,” because by its very nature, holism is elusive. In essence, this is the point. Holistic education is an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges the affective component at play. Yet this iteration of holism does not connect with wisdom traditions or embrace an animated worldview. In this way, holistic education tends to over-simplify significant concerns about life and living, which does not do justice to the questions. I thus prefer the term holistic pedagogy over holistic education. In this vein, when grounded in an animated paradigm and embraced in a sacred manner, holism can be a way in which to recognize the four parts of ourselves. In classrooms where students are encouraged to be embodied in such a manner and to show up as their full selves, children and youth are able to explore what it might mean to be human *while* learning curricular outcomes. Holistic pedagogy from an animated perspective embraces the metaphoric and symbolic. In classrooms that honour this way of being, students are given the opportunity to process life (both internal and external realms) in a safe and caring community that recognizes that wholeness comprises both joy and suffering.

Metaphoric ways of being in the world open up possibilities, allowing for holism to move beyond the modern paradigm’s desire for control and into the realm of embracing the unknown as a way of allowing that which is at once beyond us and within us to lead. This inability to pin down a definition of holism is a key aspect of its allure, keeping it open to mystery (Keller, 2008). In capitalist societies—perhaps due to accountability measures or a fear-based approach to meeting the academic needs of students—many schools do not allow room for ambiguity, for mystery, for seeing what might unfold. Holistic pedagogy, meanwhile, if grounded in an animated worldview, starts to offer students and educators a way to connect (with self, others, and curricular content) in a meaningful way.

In the context of this dissertation research, the field of curriculum and pedagogy moves beyond theory alone to (re)consider the lives of children in a way that curriculum theory has a direct voice on matters of wholeness and well-being in the contexts of childhood. By learning from various understandings of child development beyond Eurocentric perspectives alone, educators may be better able to prepare for teaching and learning in such a way that the learning environment itself honours and cultivates a full expression of emotions in the lives of students. This research contributes to the discussion of well-being in a way that children are able to embody practical expressions of joy as well as suffering (and everything in between) that contribute to greater understanding of wellness and illness in their lives.

### **The Role of Curriculum and Pedagogy**

I spent much time reviewing current academic literature in the fields of curriculum studies and pedagogy on the topic of well-being. I read extensively in six applicable journals, including: Curriculum Inquiry, Harvard Educational Review (HER), In Education, the Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JACS), the Journal of Curriculum Studies (JCS), and the Journal of Curriculum Theorizing (JCT), focusing on the latest twelve years of publications.

The choice to study these six journals in particular arose from their applicability to curriculum studies overall, personal interest, and for the range of their educational focus and readership. Upon systematically reviewing articles in these journals from 2008-2019, 95 articles in total were found to relate in some way to my study. However, of these 95 articles, only two referred directly to “well-being” or “wellness” in the title or abstract, and none of them had keywords related to “wholeness” at all, indicating that the field of curriculum and pedagogy lacks an in-depth, ongoing discussion about these topics. While three articles discuss the idea of

listening to students or paying attention to interactions, and the same number focus on concepts of children and childhood, no articles published in the past twelve years of these six journals focus on how educators might better attend to the holistic well-being and wholeness of children in school settings. These 95 studies contribute to the field of curriculum studies as a whole, but not specifically to the topic of the mental well-being of children. This leads me to wonder if in recent history, the wellness of children has not been considered a curricular or pedagogical issue? In purposely focusing my efforts on these six journals over the past twelve years, it has become imminently clear that the particular field of curriculum and pedagogy does not have much to say about wellness or wisdom. A further detailed exploration on the topic of well-being is thus not included here. I have chosen not to write a discrete literature review section, as the findings demonstrated that recent scholarly articles published in leading educational journals do not address issues of wholeness and well-being from an animated perspective that emphasizes a four-part person, nor do many acknowledge the presence of an inner life. By reviewing the literature with the purpose of observing wholeness as a way of being it becomes evident that there is a large gap in current studies. Accordingly, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the curricular ancestors whose work provides a foundation from which to understand the educational perspectives that underlie this dissertation research.

### **Curricular Ancestors**

Six scholars from the past century whose educational focus has set a precedent for educational research that considers children holistically include John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Philip Phenix, Maxine Greene, Nel Noddings, and Alfred North Whitehead. As philosophers, researchers and writers, these educators have each pointed to the necessity of well-being in its holistic complexity, both in classroom settings and beyond. By investigating the curricular

literature regarding well-being, this section outlines the insights of curricular ancestors who have gone before me in contemplating pedagogical questions of wholeness and what it means to be well.

The work of Dewey, Montessori, Phenix, Greene, Noddings, and Whitehead, alongside that of Canadian curriculum theorists Ted T. Aoki, David G. Smith, Cynthia Chambers, and David Jardine, (whose work I will also highlight) demonstrates that attending to well-being in education is not a new question or concern. Their work has inspired my own, and I recognize that “as a writer, I must honour my ancestors, and the people I respect and love through the written way. Without writing I would be out of balance. Without the sacred I would be alone” (Brant, 1994, p. 3). In the context of this dissertation, these ancestors blazed the way curricularly and took the lead to reconceptualize curriculum studies in ways that allow education to be enlivened once again. Each in their own way, they highlight how we might consider the sacred in the realm of education.

In his Pedagogical Creed, American educational theorist John Dewey (1859-1952) made many strong declarations about education that provided new insight into what the purposes of schooling might be in North America. Many of these thoughts comprise the fore of my own research—in particular the idea that education “must begin with a psychological insight into the child’s capacities, interests, and habits” (Dewey, 1929/2009, p. 35). As the roots of psyche are linked with “animating spirit” (Latin) and “soul” (Greek) (OED, n.d.), Dewey’s statement implies connections with all parts of the four-part person. Further, Dewey clearly outlines that “education . . . is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 36). Understanding education as a process of living hearkens to the idea of specificity and the importance to see the individual student as a human being here and now. Dewey’s interest in “right habits of action and thought” (p. 39) connect with ideas of understanding children’s interpretations and expressions of the inner

life. I wonder: What might be the pedagogical implications of the habits of children's action and thought? Classroom settings are microcosms of life beyond the school building, and thus it is important in these spaces to foster inner development, improve interpersonal relationships, and build community. Years ago, Dewey (1929/2009) pointed out that "much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life" (p. 36). This recognition of the importance of community may play a role in further understanding and fostering well-being in the lives of children.

In highlighting the importance of valuing the inner spirit of children, Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was an innovative thinker for her time. Even today, her efforts in recognizing the spirit of the child and the learning process are maintained in the many schools named for and practiced in honour of her work. One of her fundamental beliefs was "that the thing which we should cultivate in our teachers is more the *spirit* than the mechanical skill of the scientist; that is, the *direction* of the *preparation* should be toward the spirit rather than toward the mechanism" (Montessori, 2009, p. 25, emphasis in original). This recognition of the spirit inherent in teaching is one that current policy makers may benefit from hearing, insofar as recognizing that the teaching profession requires spirit and vitality and not mere robotic functioning, or teacher as technician, or reliance upon textbooks, mandated Programs of Study, or pre-packaged educational techniques. Montessori's belief in the mutuality of the teacher/learner relationship is evident, for schools built upon her philosophies rest on the understanding that "from the child itself [the teacher] will learn how to perfect himself [or herself] as an educator" (p. 27, pronouns added). This interdependency of one upon the other for growth as human beings is an idea to further contemplate. Maria Montessori felt as though "the school must permit the *free, natural manifestations* of the *child* if in the school scientific pedagogy is to be born. This is the essential reform" (p. 28, emphasis in original). As highlighted in my research, a pedagogy

connected to the natural being of the child is essential. Here, I understand the natural manifestations of the child as recognition of their ways of being in the world that are different from, yet connected to the beings of adults, and how these aspects of childhood might authentically come to play on curriculum and pedagogy.

A scholar in Mathematics, Physics, Theology, Philosophy, and Education, Philip Phenix (1915-2002) aptly brought together ideas of ethics, aesthetics, science, and spirituality. In the 1970s he claimed that “the lure of transcendence is toward wholeness” (Phenix, 1971, p. 279). Wholeness and wellness are linked since they both recognize that genuine joy can only appear alongside suffering and that human beings may experience life more deeply when attuned to this balance. Transcendence, while in relation to spirit and the sacred must happen via embodied presence. If not, the danger of disembodied rapture remains. Beyond the connections between joy and suffering, wholeness and well-being speak to the entirety of the human condition. How might we find balance in life through paying attention in multi-sensory ways (*wâskamisiwin*)? How and in what ways might we experience healing? How might life unfold more holistically if we were to focus on the connectivities holding it all together: connections to self, to the subject matter, and to the world around us?

Phenix (1971) makes a point for spiritual awareness and how this may benefit all involved in education, as it diminishes hiding and thus increases wholeness by being willing to reveal all parts of one’s being:

The teacher who is spiritually aware does not seek to protect himself from the insecurity of uncertainty, perplexity, and irremediable ignorance. He does not try to hide behind a screen of academic presumption and professional expertise, embellished with mystifying jargon. (p. 278)

In the context of my study, I articulate Phenix’s “spiritual awareness” of teachers as those who are in touch with their inner life, who pay attention to their own emotional regulation, can self-regulate, trust their inner guidance, and who are attuned to their children. This way of being directly impacts how educators relate to students.

Scholar and philosopher Maxine Greene (1917-2014) has been an inspiration for how to advocate for wholeness and well-being as pedagogical practice through her vision of the importance of the arts and imagination in education. Greene (1988) advocated for teachers living in an engaged way in the world with children and claimed that “it is a matter of teachers engaging with active children discovering something about telling stories, articulating perspectives, engaging in terms of *who* and not *what* they are” (p. 478, emphasis in original). Through storytelling and engagement with the arts, Greene (1971/2009) outlines how “consciousness, being intentional, throws itself outward *towards* the world. It is always consciousness of something—a phenomenon, another person, an object in the world” (p. 158). Being conscious of those around us enables the relationship between teacher and student to be reciprocal and thus to increase the conscious understanding and growth of each as four-part people. She proposes that “teachers ought to explore the vistas opened by authentic young imaginations and engage learners in the dialogues, the wonderments those openings can provoke” (p. 479). Both students and teachers may benefit from dialogues about wellness and what it is that truly brings them a sense of wholeness, individually and communally. For many years, Greene advocated for open discussion about what genuinely matters to people. Already in 1988 she wrote that “in a technicist day of preoccupation with the procedural and material progress and domination, it seems particularly significant to move the young into conversations about the good and just life” (p. 479). My work further engages in this conversation.

In the discussion of what contributes to a good and just life, Nel Noddings, Professor Emeritus of Stanford University, has much to say. She declares her position quite clearly: “people want to be happy and, since this desire is well-nigh universal, we would expect to find happiness included as an aim of education” (Noddings, 2009, p. 425). In the context of this study, when children are able to connect with themselves wholeheartedly to know what it is that makes them well, they are then able to experience greater happiness. Noddings’ earlier work (1984) focuses on the ethic of care and feminine ethics. Her perspective that “I am naturally in a relation from which I derive nourishment and guidance” (1984, p. 51) guides the new ethical imperative of this study, and works in tandem with Wilson’s (2008) emphasis on relationality.

In schools, Noddings (2009) outlines that “the question *What shall be taught?* [emphasis added] is never answered definitively without a thorough exploration of the companion question *Why?* [emphasis added]” (p. 429). And so, perhaps it is time to consider happiness as a key aspect of wholeness and thus as a focus of education. If so, I ask, along with Noddings, “what should we aim at that might promote happiness?” (p. 425). This is where the fostering of a rich inner life comes in to play. While a clearer answer has yet to reveal itself, the response “capitalism and consumerism” has been tried and has proven to be empty and generative of multiple diseases today. Noddings (2009) provides some background:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, educational discussion is dominated by talk of standards, and the reason given for this emphasis is almost always economic. The underlying aims seem to be (1) to keep the United States<sup>17</sup> strong economically and (2) to give every child an opportunity to do well financially. There is something worrisome

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<sup>17</sup> I would argue that Noddings’ reflections also apply to Canada.



about both of these aims, if indeed they are the aims that drive the standards movement.

(p. 431)

In and of themselves, these goals are understandable. Where things go sideways is when they become the primary goals of an education system. Noddings does not promote that happiness be the *only* aim of education, simply that it be considered as a valid and valued emphasis. That said, “it is more important than ever to consider why we are promoting certain goals in schooling and why we continue to neglect education for personal life and for happiness in our occupations” (Noddings, 2009, p. 437). Through this study it is obvious that education and one’s personal wellness are enmeshed. Thus, there is benefit in purposefully planning to attend to this in both the curriculum as planned and the curriculum as lived (Aoki, 2005a).

Another aspect that this dissertation focuses on is paying attention to the sacred in education. Alfred North Whitehead, in his seminal text *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (1929/1957), reveals his perspective on the role of the sacred in education, as in life. I find resonance with his statement that “the present contains all that there is. It is holy ground; for it is the past, and it is the future” (1929, p. 3). It is this holy ground inherent in the educational endeavour that I am interested to explore further, as it relates to the wholeness and well-being of our young. In 1929, Whitehead wrote of curriculum being deadened when there is not a clear relationship made between that which is being studied and who it is that is doing the studying. He stated his concern with “the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum” (p. 6). This curricular call was to make all teaching relevant, applicable, and connected to the interests of the learner.

One of the things that keeps me awake at night is that much of contemporary curriculum does not hold this vitality that Whitehead addresses, and that if children do not connect with their creativity and imagination, this divide between what they care about and what they are taught at

school will only become wider. I wonder, why has much of current education not recognized the importance of teaching “a connected curriculum” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 7) so that children are able to recognize the relevance of what they are learning? Whitehead’s work centers around his belief that “our pupils are alive, and cannot be chopped into separate bits, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle” (p. 38). I venture that this languaging is his way of articulating the importance of recognizing children in their entirety as being at once physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual beings. Being a holistic human being requires a perspective of wholeness. My work builds upon this necessity to engage with children as alive beings.

### ***Canadian Curricular Community***

While acknowledging that the inspiration for my study comes from personal experience and my time teaching both in Guatemala and Calgary, AB, the potential impact of this study will be felt primarily by educators and students in Canadian school settings. Canada in particular because this is where the research study was conducted, where I envision much of my readership will be located, as well as due to the fact that many of my references about Programs of Studies (the planned curriculum) come from the Alberta context in which I live and work. Further, Canada has a very different history than the United States and in the field of education is both more critical and highly focused on provincial and regional particularities. In this way, place matters. Indeed, the work of Canadian curriculum theorists, such as Ted T. Aoki, David G. Smith, Cynthia Chambers, and David Jardine, has shaped my own research, thinking, and writing on an interpretive, theoretical level as well as on a personal, interactional level. These theorists, to me, embody what it means to be a four-part person. They write *as* holistic beings *to* holistic beings. While so often the alive, fecund world we live in is missing in many journal articles, even those written about curriculum and pedagogy, the values of these scholars come out in their

voices, as their writing is both philosophical and practical, holistic and rooted in wisdom. It is with this lineage that I find a kinship.

Ted T. Aoki (1919-2012) has been called “the most prominent curriculum scholar of his generation in Canada” (Biography: Ted T. Aoki, n.d.). For years, he emphasized “the being of teaching” (Aoki, 1992, p. 20) and “the humanness that lies at the core of what education is” (p. 18), outlining the need for a new metaphor of teachers and students—one that emphasizes their humanity rather than detracts from it. Aoki’s approach to curriculum studies is visionary. If students are treated as genuine human beings, in all of their multi-faceted, messy uniqueness, then we as educators cannot help but consider them as four-part people. His admonition not to forget “that teaching is fundamentally a mode of being” (2005a, p. 160) intentionally guides my thinking that wholeness, too, is a way of being in the world. By living a life attuned to who we are as humans, as Aoki stressed, and imagining other ways to be (D. Donald, personal communication, March 16, 2013), greater wellness may become a part of daily existence. How might teachers encourage students to embody the full spectrum of their feelings and life experiences in this manner?

One way that Aoki has influenced my thinking as a curriculum scholar is through his emphasis on the importance of approaching things (in life, in schools, in research) from a non-dominant perspective. His theories are rendered practical through his pedagogical writings. Aoki’s writing highlights macro concerns by drawing upon his own life (micro) examples. I am inspired to take up educational concerns in a thoughtful and embodied manner when I read his work. He clearly articulates the multiple orientations toward curriculum that are drawn upon in research: empirical analytic inquiry, situational interpretive inquiry, and critically reflective inquiry. The first is “familiar to us as ‘science’,” while the second focuses on “a search for meaning” (1980/2005, p. 98). Critically reflective curriculum inquiry “leads to an understanding

of what is beyond; it is oriented towards making the unconscious conscious” (1980/2005, p. 106). This interest in making the unconscious conscious in the realm of education is part of what contributes to Aoki being a beloved curricular pioneer at the University of Alberta.

David G. Smith, another curriculum scholar (Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta) whose work points to many important pedagogical wonderings, has already raised many of the questions that I find my work building upon. Alongside him, I wonder, “pedagogically speaking, how can the shape and character of education be reimagined?” (Smith, 2014, p. 46). While his approach is rooted in how wisdom traditions respond to issues of globalization, mine focuses on how wisdom traditions might respond to concerns regarding well-being and the widespread increase in mental illness. In reality, globalization and wellness may be linked in ways not acknowledged in mainstream culture mired in the legacies of colonialism. I envision this “reimagining” of education drawing ever more on wisdom traditions and the myriad ways they discuss questions of wholeness. Smith (2014) offers one such way to approach the current economic and political conundrums, which is by providing

an opening of ancient global wisdom traditions for their insight on what it means to live “well” together on the earth as our planetary home. If globalization theory, and its base in market economics is constructed as a form of philosophy, then, as educational philosophers, we must live up to our philosophical calling as “lovers of wisdom” (Gk. *phileo*, “to love,” + *sophos*, “wisdom”), and not just live as passive enablers of a decaying worldview. (p. 47)

As lovers of wisdom, this love might drive philosophers to contemplate responses that are rooted in more animated worldviews. Our current way of living poses a very urgent problem: the search for joy through consumption is leading to the end of life for many humans and species. Smith, in writing about essential human concerns for so long, recognizes the danger inherent in continuing

down the current path. This research proposes that we as educators ensure that we are not passively perpetuating decaying ways of understanding life but rather are actively seeking engagement with students that honours their fullness of being.

Cynthia Chambers is a curriculum theorist (Professor Emerita, University of Lethbridge) who writes as though her very life depends upon it, sharing educational insights and offering perspective on multiple issues through the act of life writing. She asks important questions, such as how to locate curriculum within particular places (2008), how to embody empathetic inquiry (2012), and even those as basic as “where are we?” (2008). By asking these questions, Chambers indirectly provides a guide for possibilities of how to proceed. Chambers (2004) writes about research that matters, reminding us that “if you find yourself on a path, then you must stay on it only if it has heart, and it is only your heart that can tell if it is so” (p. 6). She has been a leader in the life writing methodology in curriculum studies, explaining that “memory work and other forms of life writing enable teachers [and researchers] to construct, see and hear their narrative identity, to answer the question of who they are by telling their stories to others” (Chambers, 1998, p. 14). This research project has provided the opportunity for the stories of my research participants to intermingle with my own, thus offering narrative accounts of how people can live and express their well-being.

Chambers works to ensure that philosophical questions and discussions are not separated from practice, as this is what enables the field of curriculum studies to hold ongoing relevance. Much of Chambers’ work emphasizes that how who we are as teachers reflects who we are as humans. Her writing is an example of wholeness as she writes in a way that “bring[s] the autobiographical *I* into contact with others, and invite[s] the writer to attend to her relations with the others” (2004, p. 3). Bringing the *I* into relationship with others is what I seek to do in my own work, building on the poignancy of Chambers’ writing.

Chambers (1999) writes that a task of Canadian curriculum theorists is that of “creating down-to-earth art rather than theorizing grandly” (p. 145). By sharing the words and art pieces of my participants (in chapter six) as a guide and reflection of theory creation, the data remains rooted in place and focused on practical theory. As evident in the many photographs included as data, the work we did together is work that could be done across all grade levels and across the country, if attentive to tailoring it to the students as individuals and the places in which they live and dwell. Chambers’ focus is on place in a sense at once geographical and resonant of home. In my work, I seek “to write a topography for curriculum theory, one that begins at home but journeys elsewhere” (1999, p. 148). This journey elsewhere in my research is to understand place as also being an emotional place, a meeting of four-part-people that resonates throughout the four realms of what makes us human. This research acknowledges the importance of place by honouring the land upon which the study was conducted as well as honouring the spiritual and emotional place each participant was at, and meeting them there.

David Jardine, curriculum scholar and Professor Emeritus at the University of Calgary, teaches about a way of being and writing that makes life possible in the midst of all that is happening in the world around us. In teaching his course on Hermeneutics and the insights of Hans-Georg Gadamer repeatedly over the past decade, he has inspired countless students (myself included) to consider the nuances at place in education and in life. Jardine (1992a) hermeneutically writes in such a way as “to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living” (p. 116), and offers examples of how others may do so. His pedagogical way of being in the world is a living demonstration of what it might be to live well, while acknowledging the different ways this may look for each person.

Jardine (1998) articulates that a conversation between various voices “may require that we listen to our children or to the voice of the Earth, even if such listening is difficult, perhaps

painful, perhaps disruptive of the clear and distinct boundaries we have set for ourselves and our children” (p. 78). Jardine’s (1992b) work has encouraged me to consider the fecundity of each individual case and led me to wonder how schools and education may look different today if more weight were given to the voices of children. His reminder is poignant: “You never get free and clear of the world. It is persistent—what is this about, where did this come from, how did we end up speaking like this in this world of ours, what do we do now?” (Jardine, 2012b, p. 8). It is this persistence of and from the world that has led me to write interpretively about wisdom and well-being through this dissertation.

## **In Review**

The intention of this chapter has been to highlight the role of both holism as well as curriculum and pedagogy in the field of education broadly and in this research particularly. By outlining how I read extensively in six key educational journals, and found that not much has been written about well-being or wholeness in the lives of students and teachers over the past twelve years, it became clear that there is a gap in the current literature regarding questions of mental health, the sacred, and embodiment in this pedagogical context. Recognizing how my question of the implications of understanding children’s expressions of well-being is not new, I highlighted many key figures in the field of curriculum studies and beyond who have been posing similar questions over the past hundred years. The work of these curriculum scholars sheds light on many of the main concerns that I have been outlining in this work as well.

Clearly, the problem of the disconnect experienced as a result of colonialism’s legacy of relationship denial, as well as the four sub-problems I have identified, are not new concerns, yet are ones that would benefit from hearing the voices of children. This is where this research

project finds its niche. The upcoming chapters will demonstrate this in a practical sense through sharing particular details of this research project in depth.



## CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH METHODS

This research drew on different methods at different stages of the research process. As Fidyk (2011) outlines, “methods are embedded in commitments to particular versions of the world (an ontology) and ways of knowing that world (an epistemology). Method is, thus, inseparable from epistemology and ontology” (p. 131). Accordingly, my methods of approaching, making, collecting, analyzing, and expressing data, are rooted in the ways in which I understand the world: the theoretical framework of wisdom traditions, rooted in an animated worldview and outlined through the methodology of life writing.

Methods to approach my work with children began with my own preparedness. They include Methods of Approaching Data, in which I focused on my personal preparation as a four-part person. Methods of Making Data as used weekly with the children included creative expression through artwork and writing, as well as in-depth discussions about experiences and emotions based on stories we read or guided visualizations that I led them through. Next, I discuss the Methods of Collecting Data, which highlight my process of gathering data in the form of photos of the children’s artwork and creative writing, recording and transcribing the interviews and sharing circle discussions, and writing field notes. Reasons for working with the data as I did are outlined in Methods of Data Analysis, offering a description of the “surrender and catch” method (Wolff, 1972) that I used in creating the found poems shared primarily in Chapter Six. The final Methods of Data Expression section outlines the pieces of student work that I have chosen to share and express, based on what beckoned me. Rather than systematically going through every piece of data collected in this study, I took my time over many months and years to get a sense for what aspects of the data were calling for a response. This beckoning, in the form

of a felt resonance in my body as to what stories were to be told, is in tune with conducting research from an animated worldview.

**SOS** -by Carl Leggo

*I have stories  
to tell  
and language*

*for telling them  
but still not enough.  
I need others*

*who know  
the language.  
otherwise why*

*tell the stories  
at all  
when I can*

*live them,  
except in telling stories  
I hope to weave*

*my stories  
with the stories  
of others lining*

*a text together  
a textile sufficiently  
close woven*

*to warm reality  
to let real light  
through/in/out.*

*my writing is  
always an SOS  
fear of desertion*

*alone frantic  
for rescue  
connection human*

*foot prints in the sand  
wanting the search(ers)  
to return.*

(Leggo, 2011, pp. 125-127)

A personal response: **SOS**

*Save our souls?  
Save our schools?  
Save our students?*

*I choose (d) All of the above.*

*Stories may be one way to do so.*

## **Contextualizing the Research Study**

Overall, this research project combines both empirical and theoretical approaches. Empirical in the sense that I collected data from the research participants in a face-to-face manner and directly observed what they did (in the form of action, art creation, and verbal and written response). Coe (2012) explains that “empirical educational research is grounded in observation” (p. 10). It “aims to represent, describe and understand particular views of the educational world” by attempting to represent phenomena “as data which can then be analysed” (p. 10). Theoretical research, on the other hand, is also part of this project in the sense of the material read, analyzed, and experienced over the course of these studies. The ideas that arose linked the empirical experiences with participants alongside the theoretical understandings that were becoming part of my way of being. Coe (2012) outlines how “theoretical research focuses on ideas rather than phenomena, though of course both kinds of research require both. Theoretical educational research may present, for example, a philosophical argument, a critique or a methodological advance” (p. 10). While the methods were taken up in a fluid manner without discrete stages, in this section I outline the five stages of my methods separately. I do this to offer a methodological advance as an original contribution to knowledge that highlights the importance of each discrete (yet overlapping) stage.

In discussing methods, Jardine emphasizes that researching in a hermeneutic, interpretive way does not need to be defended against more scientific ways of researching (that value natural sciences over human sciences) in order for it to be valid (personal communication, January 2013). Instead, he says that hermeneutic work simply has to be done well, done fully, and taken up deeply in order to be considered worthwhile, quality research. This research explores well-

being and wholeness in both an empirical and theoretical manner, taking an approach of both breadth and depth.

### ***Site and Process Description***

Mirror Lake School is a rural school that has a diverse mix of students from the local community and the nearby First Nation reserve. Since one of Rolling Hills School Division's (a pseudonym) Ultimate Goals is to "promote student mental and physical well-being," my research project fit well within their mandated key elements. Further, as my research focused on mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, it is directly linked to "enhancing the resiliency and mental health of students" in school settings. By aligning my research strategies with this and other outcome statements put forth by the Rolling Hills School Division, I was able to contribute toward their goal of "learning and teaching within caring, respectful, safe and healthy environments" (Rolling Hills School Division, 2012, p. 17). Over the course of one school year, I joined a grade four/five class for one day per week. I visited them regularly on Wednesdays, partly because it worked best for everyone's schedules and partly because a day in the middle of the week ensured increased the likelihood of students being present at school.

Ten students from the class received parental permission to be part of the study. These ten children formed the group I worked alongside for twelve half-day sessions, and we built genuine, quality relationships with one another. Here I will briefly introduce the participants, and follow this with some of their own words to give the reader a sense of who they are. Each student leaves a unique imprint on my heart. April, a quiet girl, was both incredibly observant as well as intuitive. She shared only when she felt comfortable doing so and enjoyed expressing herself artistically. Steve, April's younger brother, was the strong and silent type who did not seem to worry about what others thought of him. Caught up in his own world for much of the time, he

was incredibly focused on assigned tasks and emanated a well-grounded sense of self based in his pride for his culture. Chloe was a feisty grade-4 student who passionately cared about justice and fairness. She paid attention to details and expressed a full range of emotions with enthusiasm. Claudia, Chloe's older sister, worked steadfastly in her own zone, undaunted by the noise and drama taking place around her. She was precise in her work, from the artwork to the life writing to the sharing aloud. Claudia would only share what she felt needed to be said, and was otherwise content in her quietness. Veronica, in touch with her emotions and experiences, was very articulate and vocal about her life when provided a safe space in which to do so. She was in the midst of many big changes in her world, and processed them with authenticity and grace. Cormac, the informal leader of the group, possessed insight beyond his years and the leadership ability to share it in a way accessible for all. While unassuming, he was adept at cohesively integrating everything taking place around him. Henrick, buddies with Cormac, was the proverbial "boy's boy" who excelled at all things physical and outdoorsy. He was always willing to try things outside of his comfort zone and lived life with gusto. Eric was a boy whose family connection was strong, and who paid attention to both external and internal realms simultaneously. He joined our group a few weeks late yet settled in with ease, his laid-back demeanour serving him well. Bobby could use his passions in ways that benefitted both himself and others. His boisterous energy was contagious and he often found a way to make things fun. Finally, Bruce often chose to participate from the sidelines, taking things in without directly engaging. He was processing many life experiences and emotions (such as his mother's recent abandonment of his family) throughout our time together, and often expressed himself more through his actions than his words. Each of these children had a unique way of being in the world, and each contributed dynamically to this study.

## ***Self – A Found Poem***<sup>18</sup>

*April*

*Sometimes I go to ride by myself  
so I can be alone  
by myself sometimes.*

*Bruce*

*Me and my older brother are the only ones on the road when we go biking.  
The other day when we biked we went around 10 kilometres.  
It's only fun coming down the hill.*

*Henrick*

*I'm relaxing.  
Just laying on my bed.  
I'm energetic.  
I like playing a lot outside and keeping busy.  
Play around.  
I'm adventurous.*

*Cormac*

*Just, like, drawing.  
I like doing art  
It's really fun.  
When I'm doing art I just feel like no one else is there  
and I do my own thing.*

*Usually I'm relaxed*

*but sometimes I'm stressed  
because I can't do something perfect  
or I keep messing something up.*

*I don't like being distracted by others*

*so if I pretend no one is there  
then I don't get distracted as easily.*

*At school,  
in my head I just say,*

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<sup>18</sup> A found poem is a poem created from words, phrases, even lines from a text previously shared by another, be it in dialogue or written form. The found poems included throughout this dissertation were crafted by me as the researcher from transcribed interview data as shared aloud by my research participants, grade 4 and 5 students at Mirror Lake School. Each child's name is a pseudonym. I created found poems out of excerpts from student interview transcript data, and sought to arrange the pieces in a manner that highlights their poignancy. All words are those of the students, yet at times pronouns and a slight contextualizing of the interview question has been added by me. Punctuation is added throughout to allow the reader to experience the voices of the children in the way they speak aloud. This particular found poem, *Self*, draws upon student responses to the question: "What are you up to when you feel the most comfortable in your own skin?"

*“Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,”  
just block everybody out.*

*At my home  
I just go into my bedroom  
and read most of the time.  
When I'm content I'm usually reading.  
It's quiet and relaxing.*

*Bruce  
I play Lego by myself.*

## **Methods of Approaching Data**

The data for this research is considerable, and includes the interaction with research participants and much more. While the time spent with the students comprises the majority of the data, it is supplemented with excerpts from children's books, academic research studies, poems, observations, anecdotes, and facts and statistics about mental health. This section hones in primarily on how I prepared myself as the researcher to undertake the interactions with participants that later produced the data with which I worked. Mirror Lake School was approximately one hour's drive from my home, and the time traveling in the vehicle became vital for preparing myself to be in the right state of mind and presence of spirit to attend to the participants as fully as possible. Prior to leaving home, there was much preparation to do: each week I prepared a healthy snack to share, considered which yoga poses to focus on, chose a children's book to read aloud, gathered art supplies and other materials needed at the site, and checked to ensure I was following the semi-structured research plan that I had set out for the project.

Beyond these outer physical preparations, much inner preparation work took place on an emotional and spiritual level. It was interesting to note that the weeks that I was most in tune with myself (inner needs, anxieties, passions, and the ability to connect with that which mattered most



to me) contributed to smooth external interactions with the students. When I felt disjointed prior to heading to my research site (perhaps due to lack of sleep, overwhelm with the many different work roles I held at the time, stresses from other realms of my life, and so on), the work suffered and the shared participation of the group members did not seem to be as fruitful. Accordingly, I learned how to be gentle with myself and how to pay attention to that which arose within me, in order to be attentive to my student participants. As previously articulated, out of the entire grade four/five class that I immersed myself in, ten students received parent permission to participate in the research study. Prior to receiving parent permission, I had volunteered in the classroom for six months with all of the students in order to become a regular presence in their school life. For half a school day for the remaining four months of the year (12 sessions), these 10 students and I transformed a spare classroom into our holistic well-being research space. As I got to know them over the weeks, I stopped seeing them as mere members of my research group and instead as unique individuals, each with their own mannerisms, needs, and strengths. In the hour spent in the vehicle en route to the school, I would conjure images of each student as a valued human being who has something to contribute to the world: Cormac, with his small stature yet big ideas, who was clearly well-respected by his peers. Veronica, with her shy mannerisms and gentle heart, who gradually gained confidence and was able to connect with her classmates more effectively. Eric, who embodied his Indigenous culture in all he did, proud of his family and his roots. Chloe, eager to help with behind-the-scenes tasks that made her feel needed. Every week, each student brought their uniqueness into our interactions.

By approaching every student in the study not as a potential “contributor to data” but as a distinct individual, I was able to build connections with each of them. These relationships formed the basis of our learning and doing together, replacing some of my preconceived ideas of what I

wanted the research to look like. Thus, while I am hesitant to use the language of “data” to describe the interactions with students, it maintains its own resonance. I utilize the term both to demonstrate the fluidity of what comprises “data” itself as well as to emphasize the value of arts-based methods in producing data.

Early on in this research project, I recognized the need for authentic self-care. In order to approach this work as transparently as possible, I sought multiple opportunities for personal wellness, including ongoing personal therapy, artistic outlets, regular yoga practice, participating in both individual and group athletic activities, going on regular walks, eating well, getting enough rest, and so on. My approach to conducting this inquiry allowed me to experience a measure of wellness while researching, and recognize that wholeness and well-being look different for everyone. In this vein, this research invites educators to explore their own opportunities for personal well-being, to see how it might impact their professional practice.

By living in such a way that allowed me to experience wholeness and connection in my personal and professional life, I attempted to be fully present for my participants so that they were granted the opportunity through the study to be present in their own lives. Each week I approached the students and the shared space with a sense of reverie and awe for the process itself, recognizing that being open to the unending possibilities that life might grant allowed for authentic growth. This felt more genuine and embodied than stifling the possibilities through over-planned, contrived interactions. By having a loose structure upon which to base our encounters, the students grew comfortable in the routine so that they could further express themselves within their school setting in ways that allowed them to authentically respond by drawing upon their inner wisdom.

## Methods of Making Data

This study sought to connect with the “profound aspirations of humanity” (MacPherson, 2011, p. 3) through drawing upon creativity and the imagination in the work we did together. By designing the practical work with students as “opportunities for participation and decision-making,” I focused on “key strategies [contributing] towards healthy emotional and personal growth” (Golombek, 2006, p. 16). Thus, this research study does not aim to correct deficiencies or propose claims for how to attain authentic wellness, but rather seeks to focus on the wellness of children as important individuals by considering the pedagogical implications of their expressions and understandings of wholeness and well-being. As Judith Harris (2001), a yoga teacher and Jungian analyst, states, “we must remember that what is fundamental is experience. Experience comes naturally from knowing life in a concrete way, not just from following a spiritual path that excludes life itself” (p. 42). By recognizing experiences of pain and suffering alongside happiness and joy, the research participants were given tangible opportunities to gain an in-depth understanding of what it is that truly makes them well and how to acknowledge and honour the various emotions they experience.

Students were given the opportunity to express themselves through myriad modalities, since a basic assumption of the hermeneutic endeavour is “that there is always a difference between what is *said* (the surface phenomenon of language) and what is *meant* (the fuller range of possible meanings contained within the surface phenomenon)” (Smith, 2010, p. 1). By providing a setting for students to move beyond the literal world (what is said) and into the realm of the symbolic world (what is meant), I organized the research process with an overall focus on well-being, always keeping the symbolic in mind. Researcher field notes were kept throughout each stage of the process, with direct objective observations on one side of the page and

subjective researcher reflections, questions, and comments regarding the felt sense of relationships in the room on the other side.

Data was “made” together each week by following a general structure for our afternoons. The data collected throughout included my field notes and reflections, photographs of student art work and life writing, and transcription of the Sharing Circles as well as individual interviews with the students. Appendix A provides a chart outlining the weekly activities used as a guide for the twelve half-day sessions. Here, I share a summary of the activities we participated in each week in order to provide a general sense of what the time with children entailed, which is expanded upon in detail in Chapter Six.

We began each session with the reading of a story centered around ideas of well-being and connecting with emotions. As we discussed the themes that came up in the stories, participants munched on the healthy snacks that I brought. Next, students participated in yoga and movement routines that led into guided visualizations and intentional breathing exercises. Building upon the images that they conjured up in their minds and felt in their bodies, we moved into a time of art making. At times it was open ended, but often I gave them a brief directive to guide their use of media and materials. Once their artwork was complete, we joined in a Sharing Circle<sup>19</sup> where students shared aloud about their experienced sensations or memories that arose during the guided visualization, and could choose to show their artwork if they wanted. After each participant had an opportunity to share, they were encouraged to take their art piece as a starting point for creative writing. Much of the writing was completed in short prompts that

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<sup>19</sup> Sharing Circles are intentional times set aside for listening to fellow students. As a classroom teacher, I have used Sharing Circles extensively with upper-elementary aged students. If the guidelines are clearly explained as to how much time each participant has to speak, what the topic to share about is for the day, and how it is an important time to listen to peers, I find it is very well-received and a wonderful way to build respect and community, as well as reach new depths in relationships. At times they are guided by themes, as they were in this research study, while other times Sharing Circles are completely open in regards to topic.

allowed them to connect their art to their written words. Data was also made in the form of individual audio-recorded oral interviews with each student.

In order to reach the deeper meaning behind their daily lived experiences, I sought to explore images that play upon children through their art creations and the ensuing discussions. Jung's classic phrase of "as within, so without" (as cited in Stein, 1998, p. 221) is an example of how the use of artwork and image with children can demonstrate the connection between their inner life and their outer demeanour, and thus shed light on the origins of their wellness. The portions of the research project involving image were organized in a step-by-step manner, where the children were first encouraged to follow along with a guided visualization, then to draw an image that came up for them, share with the group, and finally write about an event connected to the feelings brought up by the creation of the drawing. I took my lead from Edgar (2004), who stated that "imagework can be as simple as asking respondents . . . to imagine an image in response to a question" or can involve "guiding respondents into their memory of earlier events" (p. 10). As a tangible, visible reflection of what was taking place at the core of their being, I used the creative pieces of art that the participants made as a starting point to gain an understanding about how children find wholeness in their lives. The drawing activities completed by each child were based around methods used by other studies that utilize images with children (see Kim, 2011; Sorin, Brooks, & Haring, 2012; Furth, 2002; Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Allan, 2008; and McLaren, 2012). Kim (2011) describes research designed around drawing activities as follows:

Drawings are widely assumed to reflect children's thinking about, and the interactions between, their inner and outer worlds through the medium of visual communication and representation (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Matthews 2003). As such, drawing has

been useful for psychologists and educators to access and represent children's emotions, perceptions and experiences of their worlds (Matthews 2003; Ring, 2001). (pp. 265-266)

I sought to engage children in recognizing the connection between their inner and outer worlds throughout the course of this research. In her study with sixth-graders, Kim (2011) recognized that “drawings can also be understood as an enactive process of learning, meaning-making and transforming ideas and perspectives, not only a method or product of expression or the representation of objects and thoughts” (p. 266). This process of meaning-making is a vital component of the use of image with children, and one that I emphasized through our large-group discussions.

Coates (2004), in a study involving drawing and storytelling with young people aged two to seven, noted that “one of the most obvious and frequent finds was the descriptive nature of the children's narratives about their completed pictures” (p. 20). The research that I conducted with grade four/five students was organized to encourage the children to not only describe their artwork but also to connect their work with an experience they previously had in their life and to describe the emotional component of that experience, which we did in our Sharing Circles. I found that it was more difficult than expected to get them to engage deeply in this manner. The data gathered from their writing and individual interviews tended to hold richer insights, perhaps due to the distractedness of some students when in the Sharing Circle group setting. By working with participants over time and through the use of image and dialogue, my aim was to move beyond surface concerns and pre-occupations of what may bring temporary wellness toward a deeper expression of what authentic well-being may look like in the lives of these children. This study was created following Kim's (2011) format, where “drawings were used as the main data-producing tool” (p. 266). In the end, I found the drawings to be part of the data but I realized that

the found poems based on the interview transcripts tended to hold richer responses to my questions. (See more on this in the Data Analysis section.)

Through the interactions of my participants with the presented activities and materials, as well as their interactions with one another and with me, “data” was made. Every session, every week, something different was created, whether that be an actual rendering of an art piece or written reflection, or simply a state of mind, a slightly altered way of being in the world. Participants actively engaged in the various aspects of our time together that I had planned out: there was enough repetition and predictability that they felt comfortable in the format, yet enough unknown and new aspects each week to keep them interested and excited. Most of the data that emerged from our time together is not in the form of physical evidence, but rather in the felt sense experienced in the group and in relation with ourselves and one another. This felt sense taking place between the participants and me, experienced as embodied learning and growing, is what positions me as researcher as the one best able to engage with what the children shared in subjective ways.

### ***“Making Data” Explained***

As a detailed explanation of this time of making data together, here I expand further on each of the aforementioned activities. The breathing exercises were guided by me as researcher, as an opportunity for participants to emotionally regulate: to tune in to the rhythms of their inhales and exhales, and thus notice the interconnections of their entire body. “Breathing exercises are not so much about doing something as about becoming aware of the breath and allowing it to occur naturally” (Zhao, 2007, p. 91), and so it was well-suited for the upper-elementary age group. The stretching and yoga routines included simple movements, a chance for participants to move their limbs while stretching their comfort zones as they felt what their body

needed and how it reacted to different moves. The basic drama activities, such as pantomime and frozen expressive tableaux, offered students the chance to interact with one another in simple ways, in order to realize that finding wellness for self requires a measure of connection with others as well. By tuning in to our bodies, I intended to guide them in learning to acknowledge what their physical being was telling them, without relying solely on their minds.

The creation of art pieces was used to hone in on the human being-ness of each participant, moving beyond the over-emphasis on “human doings.” As Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1991) states,

artistic expression will take place in one way or another, but the *being* is essential. So we must go back to ourselves, and when we have joy and peace in ourselves, our creations of art will be quite natural, and they will serve the world in a positive way. (p. 40)

Various guided activities, such as mandalas and nature-based art installations, were presented to the large group, and each week students had the opportunity to use their imaginations by having time to individually and communally create various artistic representations. The art pieces and subsequent life writing pieces (shared in Chapter Six) comprise two sources of data for this research. Fidyk (2012) writes that “when one is able to attend anew the images and words that beckon, it is a creative act” (pp. 348-349), and so these imaginative art “lessons” were organized to provide an opportunity for students to focus on images that resonated with them. Over our months together, a variety of small activity prompts were provided, along with various art supplies for them to use in their image creation. This use of creative artwork prompted further discussion at times, as “nearly always, for every age, drawing is a direct route to express the inner life, giving the artist and the observer something tangible, a point of contact, to reflect on” (Hart, 2001, p. 128). Throughout the time of artwork creation I circulated amongst the students while



also making a few field notes, without interpreting what they were creating. Activities were all planned to help students embody wellness. Artistic expression was used as a way in which to provide students with an opportunity to express themselves from the heart, without worrying about external academic or societal pressures and norms. Following the imaginative artwork, large group discussions were held to discuss ideas originating from their art pieces before students moved to complete their life writing.

The artwork created was enhanced by combining this first set of data alongside the students' life writing excerpts. Following the arts-based data collection research study by Sorin et al. (2012), this part of the research was organized around having children write accompanying stories from life experiences they have had that they remembered while creating their art work. Sorin et al. explain how, "requiring children to accompany their pictures with stories made a significant difference to the researchers' abilities to understand the drawings. As a result of the stories, rich and detailed data were generated" (p. 22). These researchers amassed their rich and detailed data but did not focus on analysis of children's artworks. In Kim's (2011) study, "follow-up activities such as writing and conversation about drawings were also employed to diminish misinterpretations or over interpretation" (p. 266). My study utilized both follow-up writing and conversation about the drawings, but did not focus on interpretation of the drawings themselves. Instead the focus of the individual interviews and the directions for the life writing activities encouraged the children to express the feelings they associated with the creation of the artwork as well as to connect those feelings with a particular time in their life when they experienced similar emotions. This approach was adopted as an ongoing guiding metaphor for my work because as Hollis (1995) points out, "the soul... expresses itself through image but is not that image" (p. 9). By gathering stories and images expressed and created by the students, I

became better equipped to draw connections between the current states of mental illness and depression in Canada and the embodied mental, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being of children in school settings and beyond. This ability to draw connections came from the ongoing ethical work of being together with and researching alongside children over the course of many months. Due to the relationships that were built with my participants, many of them opened up to me about their lives.

Week by week, we continued with various guided art, body, and creative written expressions. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants throughout this time, looking to learn more about their well-being, as experienced and brought up through this research study (see Appendix B for sample questions). These interviews, organized as reflective conversations with each child, were audio-recorded. Questions were created in process and focused on ideas, thoughts, and feelings that arose for them through their arts-based work. I took detailed field notes at the end of each meeting with participants, outlining how they responded to the various activities, discussions that arose, and stories they shared. The aim of the interviews was to provide the students with one-on-one conversational time with me, so they could experience attunement and have an opportunity to reflect on the experiences had in the group research setting.

### **Methods of Collecting Data**

This study is unique in its formatting of data collection: over many months and in a variety of formats, in order to capture the diversity inherent in each participant's way of being in the world. This research process was designed in such a way as to "consider children's varied social competencies and preferred ways of communicating with unfamiliar adults" (Punch, 2002, p. 45). My extensive time participating in the classroom life of my participants before the official

data collection period made me familiar to them. Together we built relations and rapport over time, so the students could trust me and feel safe with me prior to the start of the study. Further, by following the drawing and life writing activities with interviews and group discussions, students were provided with many different ways of communicating their understanding. Kim (2011) states how in her work, “the range of activities provided children with an opportunity to reflect on their own views and their processes of meaning-making” (p. 267), which I followed by designing my study in such a way that allowed for a wide range of activities through which the children could express themselves. Group discussions were held immediately following the art creation (and prior to the life writing activity) as a way to settle any unease about the process as well as to encourage children to articulate details about their emotions. The individual one-on-one interviews provided an alternative venue for expression. As described by Punch (2002) about her research with young people, “some preferred and communicated better in the individual interviews and others felt more comfortable in the groups” (p. 49). My research project provided opportunities for children to express themselves in various contexts. Overall the students in my study were more focused during the individual interviews than the Sharing Circles.

The on-site data collection methods that I employed were four-fold. First, I took detailed field notes throughout my time with the participants. I would write these at the end of each day I spent with the students, noting both what I saw and experienced firsthand as well as the felt sense that stuck with me from various happenings and about various children in the study. Second, the artwork created by the students became part of the data set in the form of photographs. Third, I photocopied the creative writing that each participant wrote for use in the data analysis stage. Finally, the interview recordings gathered from my discussions with each student were transcribed for use in data analysis and expression. These interviews were primarily conducted

during the final month of the study later in the day after the group sessions. By drawing upon these four different methods of collecting data, I am best able to emphasize the holistic nature of each participant, highlighting their responses in various ways. I seek to honour their humanity by presenting them not only as one- or two-dimensional beings but rather by allowing their fullness to be seen. This approach felt very natural and authentic to our interactions. It also created an abundance of collected data with which to work.

Through this four-fold manner gathering of data, I employed what McLaren describes as a creative approach to the data collection phase. This creative type of arts-informed research enables students to

develop a sense of embodied learning – where the whole person is involved in the process of reflection, understanding, and creation, rather than learning being a “head” exercise, confined to tables, chairs and books. Creativity provides a new vocabulary, not always language-based, with which they can articulate and communicate their world. When teachers [and researchers] are able to engage their students with the unconscious and share this vocabulary of artistic engagement, they equip young people with alternative ways to explain, understand and inquire into their experiences of themselves, others and the world around them. (McLaren, 2012, p. 94)

By following the design set forth by researchers who have embodied arts-based data collection (see Kim, 2011; Sorin, Brooks, & Haring, 2012; Furth, 2002; Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Allan, 2008; and McLaren, 2012), this study collected data that considered the artistic engagement of the students by allowing them to creatively express both their inner and outer selves. Photos of the artwork and found poems based on the transcribed interviews and life writing created by the students are shared in Chapter Six. In Chapter Seven, connections are drawn between the stories

of what emerged through our time together and concerns of well-being and wholeness. It was through the interaction with children that the interpretive framework guiding the study came alive and found its meaning.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

Following the sensibility of both wisdom traditions and well-being, neither the artwork nor the life writing is directly analyzed or interpreted. Since “there is a danger . . . that in our eagerness to respond to perceived images we put our own interpretations on them” (Coates, 2004, p. 7), the children’s work is held alongside the researcher’s field notes and stories of our encounters, with emphasis placed upon the overlap of their created work with the curricular and pedagogical sensibilities of well-being. The collected data is looked at in such a way as to highlight the specificity of each particular story as well as to draw connections between the stories and a larger discussion of wellness and the four main concerns outlined throughout, as exemplified further in Chapters Six and Seven. By embracing the particularity of the experience of learning and growing together, this work emphasizes the importance of listening to the voices of the young and sharing life experiences as a key aspect of wholeness. The research was conducted with an ethic of personal and collective wellness in mind. To this effect, Becker (2004) outlines how “ethics has both instinctual and spiritual components” (p. 42), and Noddings (1984) claims that moral education is “a community-wide enterprise” (p. 171). These statements affirm the Cree values of *wîcêhtowin* (good relations/mutuality) and *wâhkôhtowin* (extended relations) as highlighted in chapter two and revisited throughout this work.

Due to the high volume of content produced by each participant, my approach to data analysis became more of a felt sense than a strategic linear approach. “What resonates”? became my guiding question for what to focus on, when to unpack a story further, and how to go about

doing so. In learning to sit with and surrender to the collected data and then to trust my gut on how to approach its analysis, I have had to face my discomfort and become willing to own this “surrender and catch” (Wolff, 1972) approach for the found poems as well as the discussions of the data. Just as my research question chose me (rather than me choosing it), my method of data analysis did the same. Jung focused at length upon how we alone do not choose our life, it chooses us. Jungian analyst James Hollis (2003) expands upon this, writing that “we do not make our story; our story makes us” (p. 22) and that “not only do we have questions, but life has questions for us” (p. 15). To emphasize even further, “Something is living us, even more than we are living it” (p. 16). This insight is echoed by Richard Rohr (2003/2010), who articulates how we are “co-creators of our unfolding story.” To me, this is at once daunting *and* a huge relief. While I do have agency in the unfolding of my life, if I am able to surrender to the process of my own life story, my way of living emerges more from a place of calm and grounding. Regarding the data analysis, rather than cognitively choosing how to work with the data, I instead followed an embodied response that required me to surrender to it. From a Jungian perspective, the unconscious speaks through the body, meaning that it is important to pay attention to cues the body gives us and not to disregard it. None of this means that I am only following my gut in how I approach this work. As articulated in the coming paragraphs, the “surrender and catch” (Wolff, 1972) approach is a rigorous and appropriate way to analyze this data. There are principles, sensibilities, and values that I have followed in this work, as in my life. While not an exhaustive list, some of these sensibilities include a focus on relatedness, connectedness, and wellness. When conducting my research—both face to face with participants as well as behind-the-scenes when reading and writing—these principles have been my guide. The unfolding story of this research is rooted in my values that highlight the key ideas shared throughout: that by living in an

embodied manner that is attuned to the realm of the sacred, overall well-being can be enhanced, both in schools and beyond.

In this manner, data is shared in the form of student artwork and written work, field notes and research stories, alongside created found poems. Found poems are poems created with words and phrases that are originally found elsewhere. In this context, from words students spoke during individual interviews and sharing circle discussions or words they wrote at some point during the study. Inspired by the work of Monica Prendergast (personal communication, March 17, 2015), I created the found poems by drawing upon participant words in a way that does not attempt to capture a brief “sound bite” but rather hopes to distil their many words into articulate, poignant excerpts. Again following the footsteps of Prendergast, I base my work on the “surrender and catch” approach as per German American sociologist Kurt Wolff’s (1972) method that he explains as a “*radical mode of being*” (p. 460). As Wolff (1972) articulates:

“Surrender” is synonymous with “being” or “experience of being.” Its seminal meaning is cognitive love: whatever other meanings it may have flow from it. Among them are total involvement, suspension of received notion, pertinence of everything, identification, and risk of being hurt. To surrender means to take as fully, to meet as immediately as possible whatever the occasion may be, that is, not to select, not to believe that one can know quickly what is to be understood and acted on, hence what one’s experience means; not to suppose that one can do justice to the experience with one’s received notions, with one’s received feeling and thinking, even with the received structure of that feeling and thinking; to meet it as much as possible in its originality, its itself-ness. (p. 453)

It is the “itself-ness” of each of the contributions from the students I worked with in the study that grabbed me, that beckoned to be included in their various forms throughout this

dissertation. To not “select” the data but rather to “meet as immediately as possible” that which beckons me is a way to surrender to this process of data analysis. Prendergast (2015) explains in more simplistic terms what this might look like in educational research:

It is with these precepts in mind [Wolff’s] that I entered into the . . . [research] with the intention to *not* determine what exactly I was looking for, nor determine what I would find. Rather, I would attempt to let the many dozens of poems I would read wash over me, and let whatever impact each one might, or might not have, happen. (p. 683)

I took a similar approach to my transcript data: surrendered to it and in so doing, let it catch me. Repeatedly reading through data without originally seeking to find any particular themes, I remained open to the possibility of what might emerge. I highlighted sections of text from each participant that resonated with me, and copied and pasted those words only in separate documents for each participant. Then I read through each participant’s words again in these new, condensed documents, noticing particularities and highlighting different topics of conversation with different-coloured highlighters. Wolff (1972) outlines the latter part of this method:

“Catch” is the cognitive, intellectual, existential result, yield, harvest . . . of surrender, the beginning (*Anfang*) made in it; a new conceiving or conceptualizing. But what is caught (comprehended, conceived), what catching (“conceiving”) means cannot be anticipated (otherwise surrender would not be as unconditional as it is), for its result may not be a concept in the everyday or scientific sense of the word but, for instance, a decision, a poem, a painting, the clarification or urging of an existential question, a change in the person: ontologically it always is a new conceiving, a new concept, a beginning, a new being-in-the-world. Still, it can never exhaust surrender, the experience, but only approximate it. The experience recedes from the surrenderer like water from the net, and



challenges him to explore it, to invent. (pp. 453-454)

This process of “catching” is what allowed new understandings to emerge from the data. As Wolff (1972) articulates, “a new concept . . . a new being-in-the-world” (p. 454). The parts that were “caught” in my work came from fully surrendering: body, heart, and mind. From this state of engagement with the transcripts, certain pieces stood out and caught my attention. My awareness was drawn to specific aspects of what the students voiced and thus emerged my desire to share what they expressed. Areas that naturally appeared in each of the transcript documents, perhaps due to the semi-structured interview questions that I used as prompts, were: family relationships, friendships, extra-curricular activities, sense of self, and embodiment.

This method of surrender and catch, while not named such in her text, has been used beautifully by Nobel Prize (in Literature, 2015) winning journalist Svetlana Alexievich (2006) in *Voices from Chernobyl: The oral history of a nuclear disaster*, where voices of various interviewees are placed thoughtfully throughout the book in poignant ways. These voices speak for themselves, as evidenced through the author’s sections titled “People’s Chorus” and “Children’s Chorus.” In this award-winning book, the various personal accounts are included in a manner that emphasizes the voices of those interviewed, not the author herself. It is noticeable in reading this text that the power of the words of the interviewees comes from their stories themselves, not from an external interpretation thereof. I seek such an expression of participants, in which their own words express their life experience, without me interjecting unnecessarily. Thus, various excerpts from each of the participants are shared, not with the goal of interpretation but rather with the desire that each found poem based on student words will spark the light of recognition, of wonder, in the reader. I further write around these pieces by means of

circumambulation through the lens of various wisdom traditions, to see what holistic perspectives might have to offer in the discussions sparked by the students.

Circumambulation is a Buddhist concept defined as the act of “circl[ing] on foot especially ritualistically” (Merriam Webster, n.d.). The first known use of the term was in 1606, coming from the Latin “*circum-* + *ambulare* to walk”. I take my lead from the Online Etymology Dictionary, which indicates roots in “to walk around” (n.d., “circumambulation”), suggesting a connection with ambling. In this research, I circumambulate in order to revisit an idea or topic in multiple different ways, not by explaining precise attributes of it but rather by repeatedly walking near and around it in a manner that allows the wisdom of the participants to speak to the topic itself in this cyclical manner.

By following this format, which is Jungian in nature, data was selected and data was left out. Some participant work is showcased much more than others, simply because it was what called to me. Prendergast (2015) explains how this manifested in her work, as “many authors and their poems were left by the wayside as they failed to invite my surrender to them” (p. 683). Initially I struggled with this, as I wanted to give equal voice to each participant. I realized, however, that this would be artificial, as equal voice is not about what arises. Upon sitting with my own discomfort as well as sitting with the words and artistic creations of the participants, I came to realize that this method of “craft[ing] found poems from the excerpts that attempt to illustrate . . . [concerns of wholeness and well-being] I had caught in this inquiry” (Prendergast, 2015, p. 683), required a letting go. Surrendering, letting go, from a Jungian understanding is a way to allow psyche, or soul, to lead instead of ego or persona. For me this meant slowing down and allowing the data itself to show me how to proceed with the analysis. In this research, the focus was on children’s voicing of concerns of wholeness and well-being. I could not force

every/any one of the students to care, to share, to open up to this calling. Instead I chose to honour who they are as individuals as well as honour their lived experiences by surrendering to the shared experience and then portraying it as it caught me. This process required much time spent on hands-on processing: highlighting, cutting and pasting, grouping, and formatting. Much like Annie Dillard's (1995) book of found poems, I experienced this sort of writing in the same way as she expresses, "this is editing at its extreme: writing without composing" (p. x). This process also comes down to me as researcher: the choices made connect with my own readiness and preparation in approaching the data.

The creation of the found poems allowed me to engage with the voices of my participants in a way unequivocal to any previous attempt on my behalf. As Prendergast (2015) expresses, "critical poetic inquiry invites us to engage as active witnesses within our research sites, as witnesses standing beside participants in their search for justice, recognition, healing, a better life" (p. 683). This act of witnessing took place interactively: I of them, them of me, I of me, them of themselves, and always via the presence of spirit. When we witness, there is no projection of the self onto the other. We simply hear and see the child as she is in that moment—angry, passionate, shy, or other. It is an act of active receptivity (Fidyk, 2019). I was guided to witness the children through my personal experience of presence as prayer, of intentionally learning to pay attention to the spirit both within and beyond. I sought to open the students to the possibility that spirit is not just in the trees and the air but in them, in their art, in their lives. A better life, healing from the inside out: this is what makes this research worthwhile. As such, "*witnessing* is an act of presence and testimony, of authentication and memory-making, of evidence and seeing. Witnesses are necessary, not extraneous, to the processes in which they are implicated; a witness in a theatre context is *integral*, not *accidental*" (Prendergast, 2008, p. 95,

emphasis in original). Witnessing my participants was integral to the research process we shared as well. And so, witness them and their wise embodiment is what I did week upon week. Echoing Fidyk (2019), “as witness—I listened without judgement, was open and curious” (p. 66). In reading this piece, you are inherently a witness to my own process of researching, surrendering, and healing. This method of analyzing data makes the content of what is said, drawn, written, *created*, come alive.

### **Methods of Data Expression**

Coe (2012) explains that “research is conducted for a range of very different reasons” (p. 8). Two of the main focuses of my work is for educators to find a connection with our inner wisdom, as well as to slow down enough so that the busy filling of time is not what guides us. This focus has to do with how we each live our lives; how we live well and guide children to do the same. Along these lines, the findings of this research encourage educators to consider *doing less* and *being more* with their students. In no way am I saying that teachers stop teaching creatively and forget to attend to the needs of their mandated Programs of Study or their students as individuals. Alternately, I encourage educators to connect with their own inner lives, to acknowledge internal guides<sup>20</sup> who have the ability to transform them into teachers who embody wholeness, and to thus foster this way of being in their students as well. In so doing, education becomes less about frantically trying to meet prescribed outcomes and more about what it means to share life and living together. On both micro and macro levels, what happens inside the body also manifests outside the body. This insight has far-reaching effects, as it can be applied to many of the problems facing our world today: the climate crisis, systemic racism, global pandemics,

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<sup>20</sup> Inner guides might be a personal ancestor, a symbolic or theoretical one, such as curriculum ancestors; they might be places and relations, such as Guatemala or the land upon which one was raised; and they might be an energetic entity like Creator or Trickster.

mental health concerns, and more. If each person does their own inner work regarding individual struggles they face, larger struggles in the world—that are indeed cultural and spiritual and interconnected struggles—may be attended to in a more attuned and nuanced manner. By *inner work* I mean body awareness, emotional regulation, attendance to personal fears and disowned parts (shadow elements), processing issues as a four-part person, while keeping respectful relations (with self and others) at the fore. This is what I hint at through the term inner work.

All people are inherently four-part people. If the young are able to experience and articulate what it feels like to live as a four-part person, then education and educators have played their part in drawing their awareness toward the importance of wholeness as a way to be well, integrating the myriad emotions and experiences that comprise life into their being. Thus, the reasoning behind this research is to bring awareness to the inherent connections between well-being, the sacred, and living in an embodied manner.

By drawing upon possibilities of what *might be* in education, nowhere in this section on Methods of Data Expression will you find a traditional “results” section, nor a place where I tie together all of the loose ends. Where is the fun in that? Where is there room left for pondering in the midst of spelling things out word for word or following a template on how to live or even how to write a dissertation? Some people refer to this type of work as laying out all of the dots so that the reader has room to connect them (D. Donald, personal communication, September 2014). In the remaining chapters, I lay out the dots of the Research Stories lived by my participants as an invitation for readers to circumambulate around them. In this manner, the data is expressed as a sort of beckoning. For me, walking, ambling, ritualistic circling, simply using my feet to take me places have all become visceral ways that I have experienced wisdom in my life of late. This method of transportation allows me to slow down, step out of my hectic pace of daily life, and

appreciate the wonders that wandering may have in store for me. In the context of analyzing the data in this research, I surrendered to my participants' sharing, creations, and voices. It is critical to note that I did not engage in traditional interpretation or analysis of their artworks and sharing. I listened, observed, and received. Too often adults read children's work through a pre-determined image of what should be. I witnessed; I ambled around it. And from a place of receptivity, I attuned to what felt like their bits of meaning, shared in the Research Stories chapter to follow.

Throughout the writing of this dissertation I have experienced this slowing down in myriad ways: while hiking the 800-kilometre Camino de Santiago in Spain, by willingly allowing my dog to lead me around the extensive river valley at the heart of my home of Edmonton, Alberta, by walking under the vast prairie sky along the open expanse of the gravel road near the farm where I grew up, and by navigating various marked circular walking meditation mandalas around the world. Each of these differing methods of ambling has provided me with varying perspectives on the world and my place within it. It feels natural, then, to approach the expression of my data in a like manner: by sharing certain aspects of it on paper, allowing the reader to take it in aesthetically and thoughtfully, perhaps even allowing themselves to be emotionally or spiritually moved by the content, circumambulating the work of the children who were my participants. Through this "walking around" the data, "ritualistically circling" it, it is my hope that it will become possible to slow down: to amble a little, to wander through the halls of education, to ground into the earth by rooting downward through our feet.

## CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH STORIES

**Wild Geese** By Mary Oliver

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.*

(Oliver, 1986, p. 14)

### **In the Beginning**

This chapter ventures into the stories that arose from my time at Mirror Lake School. Here, the focus is on the findings that arose through working with the students. Excerpts of the children's work, images of their artwork, stories of our time together, and my researcher reflections and field notes are found throughout the chapter as an embodied presentation of the myriad ways that data anchors this study. Activities are outlined in detail to offer insight into how educators might integrate this sort of holistic work into their classroom practice. The stories and data are united to the main concerns outlined throughout this dissertation, not by way of interpretation but rather in order to explicitly make connections between the realms of micro and macro, part and whole.

### ***Researcher Reflection: August 17***

*As I sit in my office early this morning, sipping a hot soothing beverage and staring at my computer screen to work up the gumption to start writing, I look up into the clear blue sky and see a flying V of Canadian geese heading south. They are majestic and beautiful, gliding through the air in unison as they flap their wings, making an imprint on my memory as they sail beyond the purview of my little office window. I am reminded of Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese*, that is tacked to the bulletin board next to me. I turn and read it aloud, allowing its cadence and message to once again seep into my bones. This reminder gently encourages me to write, to keep perspective on what it is I am spending umpteens hours on each day, and to do so with courage, grace, and dedication. To continue to have the heart to write authentically, in a way that creatively resonates within. As Mary Oliver (1986) pens,*

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination... (p. 14)  
May this imagination be our ongoing guide.*

Taylor (2009) writes, “sometimes it is enough to see the world through a tree’s eyes” (p. 196). Having experienced this firsthand at Elder Bob Cardinal’s learning lodge on the Enoch Cree Nation multiple times over the course of my doctoral studies, I can attest to the power of falling into the loving arms of a tree’s embrace (B. Cardinal, personal communication, April 2013). How does a tree see the world? It is rooted to the earth in a particular place, and so its worldview, its perspective, is grounded in the knowledge of the humus of that very spot. And yet, it reaches heavenward, at once communicating extensively with all beings around it, both above and below the earth. This visual of the grounded tree offers a foundation, a place from which the discussion can proceed. In hindsight I see the important role that *place*—Mirror Lake School’s rural locale, as well as the *emotional place* of each of the students—plays in this research context, and am also inspired to consider the situated context of where I am living and working.

As emphasized in the title of this dissertation, mental health, the sacred, and embodied wisdom were the ideas at the forefront of mind when conducting face-to-face research with the students. Seeking to enhance these focus areas in the lives of each participant, the format of our days together unfolded in ways at once planned, yet dynamic.



*Field Notes: January 14*

Wind blowing me off the road  
Light peeking over the horizon  
Birds circling roadkill  
Trees barren  
Venturing into the snowy unknown  
Stuck in the parking lot

Joy and laughter cross-country skiing in the winter wonderland  
Indoor recess  
Listening to music videos  
Paper airplanes landing in my hair  
Children sneaking out into the halls  
Oh the dynamics!  
Crushes, tattle-tales, jockeying for position  
Beautifully exhausting

**Flow of the Research**

As my poem above emphasizes, there are many varying factors at play in every school day, in every interaction. Part of the allure of conducting research with children rather than educators is that when given the freedom to make their own choices during unstructured times of the day, the tightly-bound structure of academic concerns gives way to a dynamism captured within each student. The format of the days researching in the school are outlined in detail in the upcoming pages to invite readers into a felt sense of the interactions and their significance within this research project.

The research took place for a half day each week for twelve weeks, with the group of students and me working together in a spare classroom. Prior to the start of the project a parent meeting was offered to make personal connections, explain the study in detail and answer questions. While the projects and research process were fluid and overlapping over the weeks, the twelve-week process was loosely divided into three parts, as previously alluded to and expanded upon in detail throughout this chapter. The first four weeks were organized as a time to get

comfortable with one another, to focus on body work such as breathing and visualization exercises, yoga, and drama, and to collect data in the form of field notes, art work, and life writing. During the middle four weeks we focused more specifically on guided visualization exercises and art work, large group sharing, focused group lessons/discussions, and life writing. The final four weeks built upon the previous eight. All students participated in the creation of an art-based transition object to keep once the project was complete, and I also conducted individual interviews with each student. Data collection included transcribing the interviews, compiling field notes and weekly reflections, and photographing all the art work and life writing.

Sample activities that I did with Mirror Lake students in the research group are outlined, some in more detail than others, to offer ideas for how students might be supported as four-part people within the realm of a school day. I regularly began by reading aloud a short story picture book that introduced themes that we focused on throughout our time together, often accompanied by eating healthy snacks such as hummus and vegetables, fresh fruit, and crackers and cheese. Each week, the main activity followed the story, snack and visualization. We participated in a Sharing Circle as a way to close our time together, which let students share how they were feeling (emotionally, mentally, physically, and/or spiritually) after participating in the various activities.

### ***Researcher Reflection: January 29***

*Each week on site, I was shocked by the barrenness. Out in this beautiful rural locale of Mirror Lake School, I saw the hot air billowing out from the stacks of the school while driving up, knowing that there are not enough students to fill most of the classrooms. The land is scraped bare in search of Alberta's 'beloved' fossil fuels. Snow as far as the eye can see, with regal coniferous trees offering a bit of warmth to the landscape. I wonder about the barrenness experienced inside this school building, inside the classroom I assist in, inside the teacher, inside each student, inside myself... I recognize the importance of researching the pedagogical implications of children's expressions of wholeness and well-being. This is a move beyond what meets the eye, beyond the surface-level wants and needs that seem to comprise too much of life.*

*In crafting activities that enable me to work with students in responding to this question of wellness in indirect ways, I seek opportunities to allow participants to experience a connection to their own inner wisdom that is different from the regular classroom structure.*

## **Role of the Researcher**

The particularity of this research is evident due to the self-study that I undertook in conjunction with the study with my participants, in the form of my own inner exploration and soul-searching. In working qualitatively, I sought not to make this work broadly generalizable but rather to focus on the experiences of my participants in relation to wholeness and well-being. By curating interactions in the research space with each participant's inner wisdom, with one another, and with the planned activities, I brought my own passions to the work. As noted, during this research I was also completing my yoga teacher training and an intensive post-Masters program to become an art therapist. All of these professional interests overlapped in unique ways, and in these cross-disciplinary readings and practice I paid particular attention to the distinction between "helping" and "assisting," or "joining alongside." Often in the coined "helping professions" such as counseling or psychotherapy there is an initial misunderstanding, whereby the client feels as though the therapist is there to fix or help figure out the client's problems by telling them what to do. Rather, the therapist's role is to offer strategies and to encourage and support the client in figuring out their own possible responses. In teaching and researching, I feel that it is further important to clarify the focus of these roles: the role of an educator is to support the students in their own self-discovery and ongoing growth. This research offered an opportunity to join and assist the student participants in their life's journey, rather than "help" them. Helping is defined as doing something "that makes it easier for someone to . . . deal with a problem" (Merriam Webster, n.d., "help") while assisting is "to give support or aid" (Merriam Webster,

n.d., “assist”) to another, whereby the purpose is not to offer solutions but to support someone on their journey. This support for the participants was a main focus of the research.

### ***Researcher Reflection: February 26***

*Oh to be ten years old again! When I was a child, all I really wanted was to grow up and become an adult. I made plans for adulthood and wrote methodical diaries about these dreams. I would sneak away from my younger siblings to simply find some space outdoors to contemplate life without their annoying distractions. I never really felt alone. I rarely got bored. I could entertain myself for hours. While I dreamed of the future, I was content in the present. It was a good age to be and all was right in my world. Now I am beginning to recognize how vital this connection between the age I loved as a child and the age of my research participants is to both my personal and professional development. I am drawn to that grade five stage of no longer being childish, not quite a teenager, and not quite sure about what it's all about but okay with that too. These students I am working with are each individuals. Having a handful of participants is so interesting because each one of them has their own strengths, struggles, insecurities, and idiosyncrasies. This is what makes it so important to hear what they have to say!*

A major downfall of many schools is that they are structured in a way that makes it difficult for educators to join alongside students and support them as four-part people. As evident in many conversations with students, many feel as though there is no one to converse with them about things of import. This deep need for the students to be heard became clear even before the official project began. Beyond volunteering in their classroom, I was able to fully explain my project to the students and get started on the research activities once the ethics application was approved in February of the school year. After hearing about the research plan, one of the students, Veronica, wanted to talk. She told me about how lonely she was and how her dog just died and her only friend moved away and how she was going through a very hard time. She had tears in her eyes and it was clear that there were many emotions flowing through her that she was unable to articulate or express. I listened. She told me that each recess she just walked around alone thinking about how no one understood her and wondering what to do. My heart broke a little as I realized that she had not been given many opportunities to be heard in her life. I

remembered my grade 5 teacher who was a valuable role model for me, and recognized the weight of my role as researcher with the students in my study. This conversation with Veronica made me realize that in talking with students about well-being and wholeness, we would also need to have conversations about pain and suffering. I continued to wonder how the complexities of life might be taken up in a genuine way within school settings generally, and within my study particularly.

### ***Processing – A Found Poem***

*Mandy*

*As a kid I used to always read on the bus.  
That was my favourite time.  
It was definitely loud too,  
but I would try to just be like,  
“No, this is when I need my own little space.”*

*Veronica*

*I don't really yell. I just say it in my mind.  
Scream in my head.*

### **Research Stories**

Stories have a way of bringing people together. Whether in gathering on the carpet to hear a story read aloud by a teacher in elementary school, discussing key elements of a fictional text in a high school English class, listening to an audiobook through the vehicle speakers on a road trip, or telling about daily adventures around the supper table, stories are meant to be shared. It is this bonding power of stories that has compelled me to share in such detail the stories that make up this research. In turn, these stories speak to the larger need to connect as four-part people, inside and outside of educational institutions.

Many of the introductory activities each week were adapted from Talia Pura's (2002) book *Stages: Creative ideas for teaching drama*. These activities are capitalized in the sections to

follow, as they are in Pura's text. The first research session focused on activities to build students' ability to focus attention and regulate emotions, in addition to basic introductions and becoming familiar with one another and our shared space. We began by focusing on breathing activities, including examples such as Listen To Your Breath and Shake It Out. Listen To Your Breath is a simple, effective exercise that allowed students to relax and focus their energy. I encouraged students to lie on their backs with their eyes closed (if they felt comfortable) or gently gazing at one spot. I instructed them to breathe in to a count of four, hold the breath for a second, and then release to a count of four, again holding the breath for a second before inhaling again (Pura, 2002, p. 43). Once we had done a few rounds of this, I instructed the students to stand up for the Shake It Out activity. Here, I instructed students to shake each limb in turn, finally dropping from the stomach to bend at the waist and shaking out their shoulders and allow their torsos to hang, relaxed (Pura, 2002, p. 44). We continued to move the body in various ways including jumping jacks, shoulder rolls, arm circles, torso twists, and coordination exercises (Pura, 2002, pp. 44-46). Most of the students engaged with these activities, finding both a connection with their body and an opportunity to laugh and have fun.

The first day's art piece was individual Art Portfolios, which were used as a safe place to hold all of the work we completed throughout the next weeks together. I kept these folders in a secure location and brought them to each session so that participants could add to them. The contents of the folder were also used to guide the final individual interviews. Participants enjoyed the open-endedness of this first art directive and chatted amongst themselves while drawing and colouring the folders. We ended the first session with a Sharing Circle to hear the voice and insights of each participant. Before leaving the first day, I asked students to write out three things

about themselves that they would like me to know. Here are some responses, shared in the following found poem.

***Three Things About Me – A Found Poem***

1<sup>st</sup> official session (March 12)

*I like Lego.*

*I like games.*

*I like drawing.*

*I am adventurous.*

*I am energetic.*

*I have a big imagination.*

*I'm quiet around people I don't know.*

*I am short.*

*I am adventurous.*

*I have a crush.*

*I don't like Ivan.*

*I have money.*

*I am shy.*

*I am funny once in awhile.*

*I am active.*

The directive for this activity was fairly broad (“tell me three things you want me to know about you”) and most of the responses were not very revealing about the students. In reviewing their responses, I realized how most of them were well-versed in the external realms of expression and perhaps less so in the inner realms. I continued to plan and envision how the project might support them in connecting and expressing themselves as four-part people. Through tangible physical activities such as yoga and drama (see photo below), we sought to embody balance in our interactions.



Figure 1: Yoga Balancing Poses

What are you teaching?  
Don't act like God. Be humble.  
Keep balance in mind.<sup>21</sup>

## Just Right

I wondered about the participants experiences of feeling “just right,” or comfortable in their own skin. With this in mind, the second research session began with a healthy snack while I read aloud Mo Willem’s (2012) *Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs*, a retelling of the classic Goldilocks story. We then discussed the concept of something being “just right,” as the story presents and in relation to various experiences and feelings we each have. Following this we reviewed some of the basic breathing techniques that I had introduced the previous week, and then participated in some new imaginative movement activities, including Atmosphere Walks and Individual Pantomime. As a physical warm-up, Atmosphere Walks are imaginative walks through different atmospheres that develop students’ sense of their own bodies and how to control their movements as well as draw on their creativity. Students performed individual

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<sup>21</sup> This poem was created from notes taken during the Holistic Approaches to Learning class with Elder Bob Cardinal and Professor Dwayne Donald in Fall 2014.



actions and movements as I described various atmospheres, included walking through a field of corn, pushing plants aside with every step; walking on the moon, with less gravity than the earth; and swimming through a crystal-clear lake, magically breathing underwater (Pura, 2002, p. 48).

Students were then led through Individual Pantomime activities, where I encouraged them to pretend to be different things, including a candle that is lit and slowly burning down, a puppet on strings, and a cat waking up from a nap (Pura, 2002, pp. 49-50). Most of the participants enjoyed these imaginative movement activities and fully allowed themselves to be dramatic while acting them out. A couple of the students were distracted and focused on other aspects of the room, such as hiding under the desks, which I allowed while ensuring they remained safe. I noticed that even though not fully participating, these students were still paying attention and listening. Both the breathing and pantomime activities sought to encourage students to tap into the wisdom and guidance of their bodies. Some seemed confident participating within the closed container of our space together, while others took longer to warm up to the experience.

These activities were followed by a discussion about consent and assent, clarifying how each of their parents or guardians had offered consent for them to be a part of the research project, and then asking for their assent to participate or not (all chose to be a part of the project). The art pieces that we worked on were “Just Right” postcards with an authentic outcome. Students were instructed to send the postcard to someone they care about in order to make the artwork come alive for the participants. Going back to our discussion about Goldilocks and the Three Bears/Dinosaurs, we brainstormed about when we feel things are “just right,” and each student drew a moment that captured this on postcard-sized paper, using oil pastels. I put on soft music in the background while students were working and the room felt transformed into an

energetic yet focused space that allowed students to connect with this feeling of being “just right.” We ended with a Sharing Circle and a feeling of excitement about what was to come.

As the photographs of the postcards depict, much of the “just right” feelings portrayed by the students show linkages to nature, loved ones, and animals. While in their presence, I observed that many of the students appeared to be the most embodied—or just right—when participating individually in collective tasks. The sense of the room felt just right, for example, when each student was working on their own art piece or each was attempting to do the various yoga poses while spaced out around the room. To me, this signifies how embodied wisdom is an individual undertaking, yet one that can be experienced collectively. This gives cause to wonder how we might build more time and space for such opportunities within our school days.



*Figure 2: “Just Right” Postcard 1*



Figure 3: "Just Right" Postcard 2

### **Researcher Reflection: March 19**

*Today when I explained the four aspects of "Mental Health," how this includes well-being mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally, Bruce called out, "Are you calling me mental?" I responded by saying that I was not and outlined that mental health refers to how one is feeling overall and not just about being depressed or anxious. He then announced loudly that he was depressed all the time—except when he was playing Lego. Needless to say, I let him play Lego today and continued to subtly check in with him regularly.*

*The research experience felt absolutely magical today. The students were engaged, I felt fully "there," I wasn't forcing things to be one way or another, and we were all just present to each of the many moments. There was a beautiful feeling in the room as they created their artwork and listened to music. Their body language, facial expressions, and comments indicate that the students are excited to be there. So far they talk about literal "things" that make them well, how the stretches are "a stretch" for them, and that they are connected and into the art. At one point in the midst of it all, I twirled around in the room to the lyrical Garth Stevenson music on in the background as the children were silently creating their oil pastel "just right" art pieces. It was absolutely beautiful. We were all going about the morning in socked feet—myself included—and the twirl just felt like the right thing to do.*

*Overall today I felt like it wasn't about "collecting data," but rather about being there with the participants. Finding time, space, and place to "think and be still" like the book we read together alluded to. I loved what Veronica said about that—how the entire time that we have together in our side classroom is an opportunity to just "think and be still." So true. Another student, Henrick, who does not often share from the heart, stated today that our time together was a place where he was able to "stop and think" the whole time. To get away from the loud, crazy regular classroom environment, about which he expressed relief.*

*When I was leaving it was recess time and one of the participants, Chloe, saw me and asked if she could come home with me. I said no, but that she could help me load all the paperwork. As she was running back to the playground and we'd said good-bye, I blew her a kiss in a fun,*

*exaggerated way, and she giggled—so did I, being caught up in the moment—and then we both smiled and parted ways. I feel as though I am on a high from today’s experience: in the sense that I was feeling comfortable and confident in myself as a researcher and with how the process is going. I am unsure yet what each of the kids is “getting out of it” beyond our actual time together, but I am starting to get a sense of how I might frame things in a way that the experience lasts beyond those classroom walls for each of them.*

## **Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness does not imply a cognitive understanding of what is going on in one’s life, but rather a curiosity about what is happening—both internally and externally. As in the experiences shared in the reflection above, the first part of self-awareness is simply paying attention. By immersing themselves in the daily activities, the students were attentive and present—to fully participate, with one another, and to the feelings they had in response. By providing them with opportunities to be engaged as a four-part person (beyond academic interests alone), they were exploring more of what mattered to them and how they wanted to be in the world. By honouring and inviting their physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional capacities into the research space, over time the students settled into a more connected relationship with themselves, their peers, and me as a researcher. This was a far cry from the disconnected, competitive values often at the fore in many other classroom dynamics.

The focus of the third day together was to practice mindfulness and self-awareness by embodying this through attention to animals and the natural world. We began by reading *Jungle Drums* (2004) by Graeme Base, a book about a warthog who is teased and eventually learns the importance of focusing on inner beauty and change as a way to be true to himself. We then transitioned into some imaginative movement activities, including Individual Pantomime, Escape! Pantomime, and Animal Dramatic Expression. Some of the individual pantomimes included me guiding students to pretend to open a closet that is too full of things, to make a basket while shooting from the foul line, and to safely make their way through a field filled with

land mines (Pura, 2002, pp. 49-50). For the Escape! Pantomime, I narrated the group through experiences of trying to escape from something, such as a butterfly caught in a net, a customer accidentally trapped in a bathroom by a broken lock, and a genie trapped in a magic lamp (Pura, 2002, p. 49). For the Animal Dramatic Expression, I encouraged each student to become an animal of their choice and to act and narrate the birth, babyhood, adulthood, old age and death of the animal. Each student continued to work independently but simultaneously, speaking aloud to themselves while pantomiming the life of the animal. Some narration by me was necessary to assist students in reaching the next stage in the life of the animal (Pura, 2002, p. 51).

All of the planned activities—yoga, drama, stories, art, creative writing—were designed to both allow the students to experience self-awareness in an embodied way as well as learn more about self-awareness. In turn the hope was to expand their mental capacity in this realm, supplemented by physical, spiritual, and emotional experiences thereof.

It was clear that different students connected more with some activities than others, depending on their temperament, mood, energy level, or comfortability. Following the dramatic movements at the start of the third session, we all participated in some basic yoga stretches as a way to become fully present in our bodies. Then I led an activity entitled “Mindfulness in a Jar,” outlined in Thich Nhat Hahn’s (2011) *Planting seeds: Practicing mindfulness with children*. This consisted of a large glass vase filled with water, into which I invited students to slowly pour different colours of sand. All were encouraged to observe what happened to the sand once it got into the water, and they were mesmerized by the experience. We also discussed various thoughts and feelings that they may have throughout a given day. It was beautiful to observe them make the connections between the swirling sand they were watching in the jar with their potentially swirling emotions inside, as shared aloud in the group discussion around this activity.

My goal was to allow the participants to experience activities that shed light on mental health and how we each experience it uniquely, while also educating them about how to best attend to it in their lives. In this activity, the students all wanted to have a turn stirring the sand in the jar, and their demeanours shifted each time as the sand began to settle.



*Figure 4: "Mindfulness in a Jar" Swirling Emotions*



*Figure 5: "Mindfulness in a Jar" Settling Emotions*

### ***Field Notes: March 26***

Winter wonderland continues  
Driving slowly down icy, scary roads  
Coal-filled trains passing by

Late due to stressful road conditions  
Swarms and big hugs upon arrival  
School life happens: we are tight for time

“Mindfulness in a Jar”  
Well-received sand activity  
Calming our swirling thoughts

Story read  
Yoga moves attempted  
Pantomime exercises experienced  
Healthy snacks go over well

I wonder if I should be more firm  
Are distractions okay?

I ask them each to ponder:  
“What are your feelings today?”

In response to the question about contemplating what they are feeling, April told me one-on-one—in no uncertain terms—that she did not want to tell me about her emotions. She said that “they are secret” and “it feels weird to talk about them.” I questioned whether the reason she does not wish to talk about them was that she found it difficult to know how to express exactly what feelings or emotions she was experiencing. To this, she nodded affirmatively and appeared relieved that I had caught on to her concerns. This interaction piqued my interest in working to give the students the language necessary to articulate their bodily sensations in various situations and to have increased insight into their linked emotional states.

As indicated by this encounter, as well as in many of the responses to the creative writing prompts (such as “tell me three interesting things about you” and “what feels just right”), it often felt as though the students were floundering to find descriptive words that might accurately reflect their inner feelings. Have they not been taught the vocabulary of the soul, the vocabulary of emotion? I wonder about the level and depth of self-estrangement experienced by young

people growing up in technologically-driven, market-based societies (my participants included). In the context of this study, I equate self-estrangement to a lack of connection with one's inner wisdom, or a lack of clarity about where to turn for guidance. In our society, where disconnect runs rampant due to the colonialist legacy of relationship denial outlined earlier, we learn to speak a language of externality at the expense of internality. Further, many young people do not have quality role models or a trusting relationship with an adult of import. Even if they do, they often appear to be trained out of turning inward for an understanding of how to proceed in life, in both small and large matters. Self-estrangement can lead to loneliness—the sort of loneliness that can be experienced even when surrounded by people and things. It is a loneliness that starts from the inside out, as even when not outwardly alone, a person might feel inwardly unseen and estranged. Thus, estrangement can be from self and also from others. Most of the participants in this study were very outwardly engaged, yet often when they turned inward they expressed a lack of confidence or surety of what to say or do. I recognized confusion, as in them not knowing whether they could trust their inner guide, as well as bafflement at their inability to pinpoint what was going on inside. The unfamiliarity of the interior realm at times made it difficult for the participants to feel comfortable turning inward, perhaps because it was so foreign to them.

I aimed to provide students with art activities at which they could be successful, as well as work at individually in a mindful, focused way. We concluded the third day with more healthy snacks while working on an art piece created from animal calendar pages. Participants each chose a calendar picture of an animal from a large selection that they then cut diagonally in half, with one half glued to a piece of paper. Then, they re-created the missing half by drawing it onto the page (using the missing half that they could look at), paying close attention to the size, colour, and texture of the animal. Students used pencil crayons and were focused on their artwork and



being attentive to detail. While this activity did not encourage imagination or a connection with the unconscious realm, it did allow them an opportunity to pause, focus, and build connections. Many of them were practicing mindfulness simply by being immersed in the activity. Through this activity, it was evident through their body language and attentiveness that most of the participants were able to slow down their revving hearts, minds, and bodies. This activity worked well for many of them since it was not personally revealing yet was nonetheless a chance to simultaneously pay attention to both inner and outer happenings.



*Figure 6: Slowing Down - Animal Artwork 1*



*Figure 7: Slowing Down - Animal Artwork 2*

Our sharing circle did not result in insightful comments on this day, as many students shared superficial information not connected to the Mindfulness in a Jar activity or the experiences evoked by focusing their attentions on animals and the natural world. I found this frustrating, likely because I was hoping that students would be more insightful than they were. Only once I let this go was I able to be more fully present with the students. By taking the pressure off both myself and the participants to share in a certain manner, it finally became possible to see the sacred at play in our research space.

The realm of the sacred emerges as a way of being when all parts of a four-part person are honoured. In this project, it became starkly evident that the sacred is not something reserved for the pious or experienced in moments of wellness alone. Unexpectedly perhaps, the sacred is embodied most within the messiness of life. When the participants were being goofy, it was a sacred moment. When they were raucous, creative, insightful, confused—it was sacred. Sacred moments were experienced in the brave attempts at some new yoga move, in the vulnerable sharing during circle time, and in the participation in the boundary-pushing drama exercises. In this study and in all educational institutions, I have witnessed and been part of the realm of the sacred with students. Depending on how educators respond to any interaction with students, the

entire school day can be approached as sacred—simply by being attuned to the possibilities. This attunement requires embodiment, which in turn depends upon a holistic understanding of students as four-part people.

### **Time and Place**

Everyone has incredibly different life experiences depending where they grew up, and how they spent their time during their formative years. I share some of my own experiences as a way to invite reflection upon place and time in our own lives, as well as in the lives of each student whose life we touch. When I was the age of the participants in this study, I spent a lot of time grumpily doing chores on our family farm, voraciously reading chapter books, creatively planning out my life (both in the near and far future), and actively playing a variety of team sports. I grew up rurally, so did not have friends close by with whom I could play at a moment's notice. I learned to get along with myself, was fairly naïve, and had an active imagination. My childhood memories of time include having a set routine for when we ate supper as a family, which television shows we watched when, when we did our household and farm chores, and filling our days with many activities with family and friends—all which kept us outwardly busy. There was no time for dilly-dallying!

In terms of childhood memories of place, everything revolved around where I lived in southern Manitoba. I regularly lay on the thick carpeted floor of the living room, soaking in the early morning sun from the east through the big picture window. I looked to the south, attentively watching for the bus to appear past the neighbour's yard a half-mile away, my indicator to scramble and gather my belongings so that I did not miss my ride. Venturing north a ways down the gravel road meant running into my Oma and Opa's house, and then the yards of some of my cousins. Further afield in the same direction was the big city, not a place we went

regularly. To the west and all around our home quarter we were surrounded by fields of grain. The land was flat—incredibly flat—and a few miles from the river, making us susceptible to regular spring flooding. I learned to ride a bike on those dusty roads, I packed picnics to enjoy amongst the foliage of the crops, I drove the riding mower round and round the yard to keep it looking neat and tidy. Much of what I felt was in some way connected to my literal place in this world. Calm yet questioning. Grateful yet yearning for more. In the Found Poem that follows, each student's voice reflects a part of their personality and their experience of the pull between time and place as they reflect on how they spend their time after school, thus offering insight into their lived reality in rural Alberta.

### ***After School – A Found Poem***

*Bobby*

*I eat snacks and watch TV. A whole bunch of killing shows.*

*I swim any chance I get.*

*Like I just jump off the dock, that's all I think of,*

*like get out there and jump off,*

*get on, jump off again...*

*Fishing, quad, bikes, that's pretty much it.*

*We went fishing yesterday and the day before that.*

*We put them back, it's catch and release, since there was an oil spill on the lake in '03.*

*Jack, pickerel, minnows.*

*We live like a block up from the lake...*

*Video games, gaming out, video games, more gaming out, swimming.*

*Grand Theft Auto, Call of Duty, that's pretty much it.*

*Play games.*

*Quadding,*

*That's pretty much it.*

*Video games is like my main life.*

*Henrick*

*Video games,*

*outside,*

*or food.*

*Sometimes I go to my dad's, because he lives with my uncle.*

*It's kind of confusing to explain.*

*Sometimes we play soccer,*

*sometimes,  
he bought a croquet set last year –  
we play that once in a while,  
cards and just all kinds of things.  
I spend a lot more time outside when it's winter  
I like to play hockey and stuff,  
outdoor sports.  
Me and my dad make an ice rink every year out of hand,  
we pack down the snow and sprinkle it with water and then we dump pails.  
It's time-consuming but...*

*Steve  
Sometimes I eat or ride bikes.  
Sometimes I have a water fight.  
Sometimes I dance.  
Grass.  
There's grass for the boys and I don't know all the rest.*

*Bruce  
I ride my bike.  
By myself.*

*Cormac  
Mostly I play on electronics  
but when I don't  
me and my brother sometimes go biking down to the store or the beach  
and just hang out  
and drive around  
and sometimes meet his friends.  
I usually check my iPad ,  
read for an hour or two.  
I have supper,  
then go outside  
or go on our swings  
or go on the trampoline.  
By the time I'm done all that it's usually time to go to bed.*

*April  
Well,  
sometimes I just go outside  
ride bikes  
and go on the swing we have.  
And sometimes  
I just play with my sister's friends  
sometimes  
because there is nobody like my age over there –*

*all those girls are... they're bad.  
They're a bad influence.  
I only hang out with one of my brother's friends,  
and sometimes I just play hide and seek  
sometimes.  
At my sister's friends they have bunk beds so it's fun.  
And I watch TV with them sometimes.*

*I play inside and outside.  
I ride bikes for fun.  
Sometimes I go to ride by myself  
so I can be alone by myself sometimes.  
Sometimes I just, I do drifts on bikes.  
And sometimes like if I have my phone, I listen to music or I sing by myself.  
And I think about stuff.  
Like I think about stuff,  
like school,  
or what we did for the past year  
and stuff like that.  
I don't like—, at my house I don't do nothing fun.  
I don't get wet in the creeks and swamps over there,  
but sometimes if it's a really hot day,  
I ask my dad if he could put on the sprinkler.  
Stuff like that.*

Each student's life is unique, and each of their experiences are their own. In the same breath, many of them express commonalities and differences in how they spend their time and energy that may be found amongst other children of similar ages. These poems from the participants prompt me to ask, how might each one of us live into our full selves as four-part people in the place and time we find ourselves in?

Our fourth day together began by reading *A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon (1998), a humorous children's book that focuses on identity and the importance of being comfortable in your own skin. The students and I discussed how each of us has to get in touch with our own emotions, and not base ourselves on what others think. Further, we talked about how growth is not only external but also comes from within. (The need to be true to ourselves became a recurring theme throughout the coming weeks.) We focused our time together on

activities to enhance our concentration and emotional connection, including Capture! Pantomime, Listen to the Room, and Emotion Actions. Pura (2002) explains how in Capture, the leader narrates the group through experiences of trying to catch an imaginary something or someone, such as a fisherman struggling to land a fish, an animal trainer trying to coax a lion back into its cage, and a babysitter trying to get a child into bed (p. 49). The students really enjoyed moving about the room at the same time as their peers while they silently acted out these scenarios, as it made them less self-conscious. In Listen to the Room, we focused on concentration in its simplest form. I instructed the students to lie on their backs with their eyes closed or softened. They were asked to first listen to whatever sounds they could hear outside of the classroom, then on what they heard inside their classroom, and finally on what they could hear inside their own bodies (Pura, 2002, pp. 54-55).

For our next activity, Emotion Actions, I instructed participants to brainstorm as a group basic emotions and choose five to work with. Then students worked in small groups to choose various Action Word Cards (3-4 total) that fit with each emotion. Following this, they decided upon a shape/frozen action to demonstrate the connection of the Action Word to the basic emotion and performed this for the other groups (I. Pedersen, personal communication, 2010). The frozen shape works well with students because it allows them to move without feeling the pressure of verbal performing in front of their peers. My participants' nervous energy was evident during this activity and it brought out their goofy side. Nonetheless, they showed a variety of basic emotions through the physical placement of their body and facial expressions.

We finished off the day by creating an art piece in which I instructed students to create emotion face drawings while contemplating the question "How do you feel today?" I showed the participants sample posters, T-shirts, and emojis that could have a one-word descriptor to match a

facial expression. Then students created four of their own face drawings, adding lots of detail to the picture so that afterwards, classmates could try to pinpoint the emotion. The students took a lot of time creating their face emojis, choosing emotions that they experienced regularly in their own lives. By recognizing that there is a full spectrum of emotions to be experienced, and that each of us may experience them differently, participants were able to find enhanced connection, both within themselves and in their interactions with others. Increased awareness of emotional states led to greater empathy for themselves and for others, as evident in their playful and kind communication.

We debriefed the emotion drawing activity at the end of the session through a Sharing Circle. At the end of our time, we shared one-word embodiments, which is a single word to express how we were each feeling at that very moment without an explanation attached. I started by saying “unsettled,” and the student words to follow included: calm, lazy, tired, bored, sad (x2), shy, and happy. It was interesting to notice what each student said in response to our time together, and how their words impacted me. My take-away from this activity was to expand my care and compassion for those around me, and I sought to model this for participants as well: how to be attentive to our own feeling states as well of those of others around us.





Figure 8: Anonymous: "Embarrassed" Emotion Drawing



Figure 9: Steve: Untitled Emotion Drawing A



Figure 10: Steve: Untitled Emotion Drawing B



Figure 11: Chloe: Drawings of “Confused” and “Happy”



Figure 12: Anonymous: “Goofy” Emotion Drawing

Mental health and wellness encompasses the full range of emotions. As these emotion cards depict, students feel many different emotions throughout their days. By artistically creating these pictures, students were able to externalize some of their big feelings in a safe and healthy way, so that they did not have to carry them internally alone.

***Field Notes: April 30***

Read *The Other Way to Listen*  
Students encouraged to participate in silence  
What is the importance of listening?

Guided Visualization  
Students lying in comfortable positions  
Favourite spots chosen  
Eyes closed

Hand stretches to ready ourselves for art  
More time for drawing  
Music sets the tone  
They're into it

**The Role of Silence**

In schools as well as many shared spaces in capitalist-based societies, silence is not valued as a generative space as much as it could be. Various wisdom traditions draw upon silent practices as a way to find guidance and insight, whether it be through meditation, prayer, pilgrimage, yoga, time in nature, medicine walks, or more. When working with children in educational settings, I find it important to set aside silent time for reading or spending time alone while drawing or thinking as a way to re-set for the rest of the school day. In the context of this study, time spent in silence worked to encourage each participant to find a sense of personal equilibrium so that we could continue doing deep work together.

On our fifth day together, I began by explaining to the students that we were going to have a “silent day” as much as possible, and had written a note on the door indicating this so they were aware upon entering our shared space. My aim was to create a contemplative atmosphere in which students were invited to feel the sacred nature present in their classroom by being immersed in it. We read *The other way to listen* (Baylor, 1978), which invokes a deep connection to the natural world that can be experienced by pausing to truly notice and paying attention to that

which is going on around us. This book led into a discussion about connecting with nature and how it impacts us. After some gentle yoga stretches, I guided students through a visualization activity that provided an opportunity to quietly relax into their body first while being coached to imagine themselves in a comfortable scene in nature. Here, I include an excerpt from Hart's (2001) book that I read aloud, which portrays the manner in which my students were invited to connect with their inner guide:

Notice a set of descending stairs nearby . . . . Walk down the steps ten, nine, eight, . . . slowly. At the bottom you see a well-worn path, practically a road that goes off into the distance. You follow the path and notice the texture of the ground underfoot, the sounds near and far, the light, the vegetation, the wildlife, and the smells as you move further and further along the path. In time the path narrows and winds its way into a wood. The path is still clear, but now just a narrow footpath. Sounds, sights, . . . change as you go deeper into the woods. You cross over a brook, perhaps pausing to listen and feel the water. Soon the path opens into a hilly meadow; you walk back into the bright light and see a magnificent old tree on the hillside. You walk to the tree and sit under it for a few moments. The tree may have a message for you; listen and feel its offering to you. Note the words, images, and feelings that arise. When you are ready, follow the path back the way you came, unhurried. (pp. 141-142)

Students were able to sink into this visualization quite well, perhaps prompted by the silent atmosphere of the day and the inviting picture book that evoked a connection to nature that we read together earlier. After the guided visualization we transitioned directly into an art activity where I instructed them to create an art piece along the lines of where they experience joy in

nature. They worked silently with soft music playing in the background, using a choice of mediums such as pastels, paints, markers, and crayons to make their creation.

This creative art piece was followed by the instruction for students to write about a phenomenon from their life that connects to their art piece. I encouraged them to pinpoint a specific experience where they could remember feeling an emotion similar to the one they experienced when going through the process of creating their art piece, and to write about it from first-person perspective. Students were encouraged to not write about what their piece directly, but rather to focus on the feeling that it evoked. Some were able to sink deeply into this activity, while others found it difficult to link their artwork and felt-sense writing. I observed all of the students throughout and encouraged them to maintain their connection with what they were feeling during each activity, as they expressed themselves creatively. As usual, we ended with a Sharing Circle and connected as a group by talking about the experience of working as silently as possible, which was different for each student. Here, various student writing is included alongside a chosen or created picture, followed by a found poem in response to some of their observations about life.



Figure 13: Experiencing Joy in Nature – Artwork & Writing 1

*Cormac: I remember when me and my brother went to the beach and just went swimming. There was no one there and we just swam in the freezing cold water for about 5 hours. I was shivering, feeling as if I had frostbite but we just stayed there. We didn't care because we were too happy to care. We went tanning for 5 minutes, swimming for 10, and just kept going. It felt like our hands, feet, and head were about to fall off. Then we realized that we still had to bike home. It was a very exhausting ride but we did it. But we were HAPPY we did it! [Written piece to go with pictures of colourful sunset and water hole that he drew during a guided visualization activity. He shared how he likes how colourful this sunset is, that it "looks cool in my head."]*



Figure 14: Experiencing Joy in Nature – Artwork & Writing 2

*Henrick: One day I went for a walk with Cormac and we found this big tree so we climbed it. We found pinecones, hard pinecones, so then we ambushed people. I felt O.P. (over powered) and had fun. It was like we were kings and no one could do anything. It made me feel proud and strong. [Written piece to go with picture of green cobblestone path that he drew during a guided visualization activity].*

In directing students to connect with their feelings while remembering a special time and then link this to their current experience, my intention was to assist them with experiencing in their bodies what it feels like to be well, to be whole from the inside out. Body work of this sort supports their inner growth at a cellular level, without over-relying on their thinking brain alone. If able to embody what safety, care, and love feel like in a supportive, curated environment such as our research space, the students would also be better equipped to handle difficult situations and emotions in other environments.

### ***Observations About Life – A Found Poem***

*Veronica*

*Don't know what's with bananas lately. They always get rotten.  
I always used to make banana bread.*

*I feel kind of like that's the only time I have,  
like I can dance,  
I affect how I'm feeling.  
Sometimes I'll do that or I'll just dance to be happy.  
That's the only time I feel like it helps myself  
and I can't see anybody watching me and so—*

*Yeah, I like,  
I want to let everybody know what's happening, but then I don't.  
To like just say well,  
they can actually know how I'm feeling  
so they can maybe help me out  
if I'm really down some day...*

*Henrick*

*My uncle lives across a field that's a pretty decent size.  
And then we're surrounded with bush  
like there's the house and we've got trees all around here in the back.*

*And then my grandma lives right beside us because we got a double driveway.  
 One goes this way to our house and my grandma's over here  
 then there's just a sidewalk to get over there.  
 We don't use a kitchen table,  
 we have one but I've seen it maybe two days out of this year  
 and last year maybe it's been clean.  
 It's piled with papers, and all my junk, and their junk and everyone's junk.*

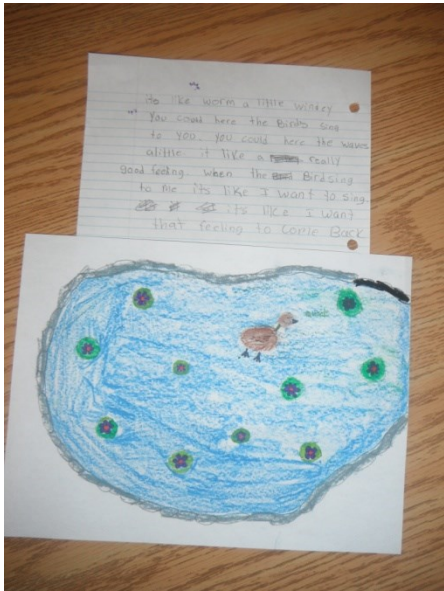


Figure 15: Experiencing Joy in Nature – Artwork & Writing 3

*Claudia  
 It's like warm  
 A little windy  
 You could hear the birds sing to you  
 You could hear the waves a little  
 It is a really good feeling  
 When the birds sing to me it's like I want to sing.  
 I want that feeling to come back.  
 [To accompany the picture of a bird on water above.]*

## **Disrupting the Current Structure of Schools**

The days are very full at my research site as well as at most of the schools in which I have taught at over the past 15 years. Every instructional minute is accounted for, and students are exposed to a vast array of subject matter and big ideas. Most educators do an amazing job juggling it all—year-long plans alongside less-specific content knowledge and skills alongside



caring for the physical and emotional needs of all their students at any given moment. Yet school schedules are not designed to make time to attend to all the intricacies of life—it falls upon each individual educator to be able to appropriately navigate these moments. In elementary schools, some examples of what students are bringing with them into the classroom includes sore stomachs from not having enough food, eyes droopy from not being able to sleep due to listening to their parents/guardians fighting, inability to focus due to myriad reasons, frequent tears thanks to difficulty self-regulating and relating to others, and so much more.

Keeping the complexity of the classroom in mind, on the sixth day together, we focused on creating mandalas as a way to creatively connect with that which emerges from within. We started by reading the picture book *Whimsy's Heavy Things* by Julie Kraulis (2013), which discusses how people sometimes try to get rid of difficult things in their lives but how it might work better to reimagine how the tough or heavy things we carry may be used creatively to build our inner strength in healthy ways. We then looked at various meditation cards from Thich Nhat Hanh (2011) to guide us through some breathing exercises. One particular guided visualization that we took part in was called Imaginary Trips. Pura (2002) describes the activity as follows:

If a change is as good as rest, an imaginary trip to another place has to be calming and refreshing. It is a good way to help students focus their energies before another exercise, or to relax after other activities and increase their sensory awareness. Having a safe calm environment in which to go for a moment can even release tension and calm nerves in a stressful situation . . . Method: Students lie comfortably on a towel or mat. The lights are dimmed and soft music may be played. The leader takes the students on an imaginary journey. The destination isn't important, as long as it's calm and relaxing, with plenty of soothing imagery. It is important to evoke all of the student's senses in this new location

in order to help them really feel that they are in this environment. The leader narrates them through the trip. Various means of travel can also be narrated, in order for students to get from one environment to another. For example, the students can imagine that they are so light that they rise up off the floor and are able to float through the sky. Or they could imagine that they are inside a giant bubble that allows them to float around, even under water. (Pura, 2002, p. 71. See pp. 71-73 for sample narrations.)

The visualization is a good way to have students soften into the present moment by easing their muscles, bracing, and holding patterns. When used this day and in any of our sessions, it was calming and inviting for the students to tune inward. Students also got excited about the basic yoga poses that we did following the visualization, as they had been practicing over time since our first session. Bobby told me that he had started doing some of these yoga stretches each morning at home to prepare for his day, a sign that he was noticing their effects on his body even if he pretended not to be into them when the group was participating together.

Following the yoga and visualization, students were guided in a mandala-making art activity as a way to calmly and repetitively express themselves. Jung describes the benefits of making mandalas in connecting with one's inner self: "the mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the center, to individuation" (Jung, 1961/1989, p. 196). In Jung's own inner work, he used mandala-making as a way to glimpse the inner life and later used this with clients to support them in their journey toward wholeness. In this research project, we created mandalas as a way to slow ourselves in comparison to the fast pace around us and to let our bodies and hearts lead our actions, rather than relying primarily on cognition. As a group, we watched a video about how to grow mandalas (ExpressingTheSelf, 2009) and then did a rough copy to experiment using pencil and paper or on the whiteboard. The children were focused while

they drew their mandalas, meditatively finding their centre. I outlined instructions for how in upcoming weeks we would continue this method of self-expression, creating a personal mandala using watercolour paper and pencil crayons. We listened to relaxing music and the activity invited students to turn inward, which many did. As illustrated in the shared visuals that follow, students created their mandalas by starting with a centre point and then methodically and repetitively moving outward. In so doing, they were building muscle memory and the brain’s capacity to link these movements with a feeling of safety and calm. The more this is done, the more students will train themselves to be able to find this state of equilibrium even when things around them are difficult. Siegel (2014), a researcher focused on how adults might support children holistically, borrows Donald Hebb’s basic ideas of neuroplasticity, being that “neurons which fire together, wire together” (n.p.). In the context of this work, experience shapes brain structure: meaning that if these regulation skills that support connection are able to fire in supported, practiced ways, they will learn to do so more often in all life circumstances. In our research space, the felt sense while working on the mandalas was one of focused contentment.



*Figure 16: Mandala Art Experimentation*

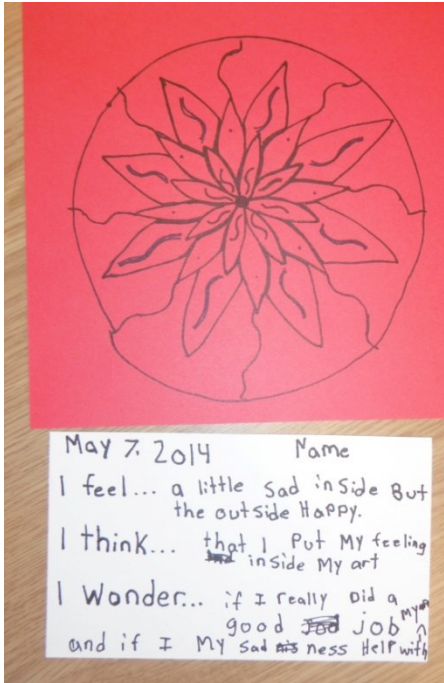


Figure 17: Mandala Art 1



Figure 18: Mandala Art 2



Figure 19: Mandala Art 3



Figure 20: Mandala Art 4



Figure 21: Mandala Art 5

Throughout my time with the ten students in this study, we did much work to move into the body, through eating healthy snacks, practicing yoga poses, breathing deeply, and guided visualizations. Individually, at different times, I asked the participants to respond to the questions: “You know those times when you feel icky? Where do you usually feel that in your body?” The following Embodiment found poem draws upon the students’ spoken words from the interview transcripts.

### ***Embodiment – A Found Poem***

*Steve*

*I’m a little tired.*

*My legs.*

*Kind of my whole body.*

*Sometimes I get some water.*

*Sometimes I just sit down.*

*My head—*

*it feels weird.*

*I eat some food sometimes to help.*

*Bobby*  
*I sort of get obnoxious.*  
*I always try some of the yoga moves upstairs*  
*when I get up.*

*April*  
*Sometimes I feel nervous –*  
*when I feel nervous I start shaking,*  
*like, I panic.*  
*And I get goose bumps and start shaking,*  
*that's when I get nervous and everything.*  
*At Talent shows, sometimes Pow Wows and when I dance.*  
*And...*  
*What else.*  
*Sometimes I get nervous.*  
*Like today I got nervous,*  
*like in this classroom.*  
*It was about doing Yoga*  
*because I had sweats on and I don't wear sweats.*  
*My auntie, she dances and every time I go there she teaches me.*  
*Sometimes dancing's hard work.*  
*She taught me how to do the beat.*  
*And she taught me how to do this and this, like this.*  
*Every time I dance I get really nervous and like—*  
*I have to think about something else.*  
*I just think:*  
*I'm there by myself and*  
*somebody's playing the music and I'm just dancing.*  
*And I don't feel nervous around my auntie.*  
*That's all, just around her I don't feel nervous.*

In dwelling with some of the participants' words in the above poem—tired, weird, obnoxious, nervous, shaking, and panic—I am reminded of the visceral connection between physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual states—of the balance-in-motion involved in being a four-part person. Even as I write those words—and I feel them in my own body—I recognize how I am unable to be fully present to the moment unless I attend to the messages to which my body is inviting me to pay attention. In our shared research space, participants were provided with the freedom to learn how to pay attention to their own emotions and body sensations.

## ***Researcher Reflection***

*I participate alongside my students. They take their shoes off, I take off mine. They sit on the floor, I do likewise. They act crazy as they try to get into unique poses, I do the same. When I quietly transition the group into stillness, their bodies respond. I set the tone with the choice of music, their body language softens. I offer of myself, they give from their innermost being. Give and take. Yin and yang. A dance. A subtle movement. It is wonderful, but it is not “perfection.” It is messy. It is real. At times it is loud and frustrating and confusing. But still, it is relational. The human connection is paramount, as always.*

## **Wisdom Traditions and Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Throughout this study, I suggest that educational theory and practice may benefit from integrating ideas and ways of being exemplified in wisdom traditions as a way to support the mental health and well-being of our young. In my work with the students at Mirror Lake School, keeping the enhanced wellness of the students at the forefront was my intention. Since I have learned and grown from attunement to wisdom-inspired ways of being in my own life, personally and professionally, I hoped to share these life-enhancing practices in the pedagogical context for fellow educators and students.

In the spirit of supporting the healthy development of heart, mind, and body, on the seventh day of the research project, the students happily munched on healthy snacks while I read McDonnell’s (2005) book *The Gift of Nothing*, which reminds readers that instead of any monetary or physical gift, the best gift is genuine, attuned presence with another person. Then we participated in more yoga poses to connect with our bodies, this time playing music that would pump the students up and energize them before doing a breathing exercise that invited them to turn inward. Zhao (2007) wrote the verbal directions for this exercise, which I read aloud as I slowly led the students through the directives:

Take a deep, slow inbreath, expanding your belly. Exhale deeply, contracting your belly. Now watch your breath: Is it fast or slow, shallow or deep? Are you holding



your breath? Are you fully exhaling? Can you feel the breath on your nostrils? Is it more apparent on the inhalation or the exhalation? Is your abdomen rising and falling, is your chest rising and falling? Do certain people cause you to hold your breath? Is there a difference in your breathing when you are walking, sitting, standing, or lying? Allow your breath its own rhythm. As you pay attention, you may notice the qualities of your breathing change – just follow it and notice what is happening. This exercise helps us to become aware of our breath, our Qi, and also naturally helps reduce tension and stress that can obstruct the smooth movement of Qi. (pp. 91-92)

Qi is described as one's inner energy or spirit, and is something different cultures express in various ways. The focus of this breathing activity was for the children to experience the movement of Qi in their body, not to merely define it abstractly. By embodying this energy, the students were able to transition smoothly into continuing the creation of their mandalas on watercolour paper. Students each drew out a mandala, growing from the inside out, using watercolour pencil crayons and connecting individually with the colours, shapes, and sizes of their work on paper while they listened to calm music in the background.



Figure 22: Weekly Art Supplies

In addition to building a healthy connection with themselves, participants were encouraged to reflect upon their connections with significant people in their life. As part of our work together, in their written pieces or transcribed interviews, students shared about their connections with their family members. Here I include some of their observations and insights about these significant people in their lives.

### ***Family – A Found Poem***

*Steve*

*My dad watches TV sometimes  
and my mom cooks sometimes.  
Sometimes my dad cleans up the basement.  
Sometimes they leave the house.  
Sometimes they go shopping for food  
or go pay the bills or something.*

*Cormac*

*My dad works at the mine.  
He runs a bobcat and sometimes he's on the drag line.  
It's like a big machine and they haul big blocks of rock.  
It's like a big giant crane.  
One day, I want to be a game designer.*

*April*

*I got, in the house,*

*I got two sisters and two brothers.  
Well, and mom and dad.  
My mom said I can't be bad.  
My cousin is almost like my sister because we're first cousins.  
And we share everything.  
And I need to make more new friends.  
My mom says I have to make white friends.*

*Eric  
There's three people in our family that have the name Marc.  
My parents speak English.  
My dad speaks a bit of Stoney and Cree,  
and my mom, she's from Tall Pines.<sup>22</sup>  
My grandparents are from Plum Band<sup>23</sup> and my dad is too.  
I visit my kohkum<sup>24</sup> at Tall Pines reserve.*

*We went to Jasper and stayed in a cabin.  
Pocahontas Cabins.  
We've done that twice now.  
There's a pool.  
It's cold and it's outside and it's deep.  
My shirt blew in. I put it on the side but the wind blew it in.  
There's also a games room in there.  
Me and my grandma and my brother and my mosôm<sup>25</sup> went in there.  
It's a way in our culture to say grandpa. There's kohkum and mosôm.  
Grandma and grandpa.  
I speak both Cree and Stoney.  
My kohkum speaks Stoney and my mosôm speaks Cree.  
They speak to each other in English.  
Sometimes they speak their language.*

### **Researcher Reflection: May 21**

*The kids and I have gotten into a good groove. It's like I don't need to overthink or plan excessively these days but just go with the flow, keeping the research outline and goals in mind. We can now bug and tease each other and be silly. With the yoga moves I'll purposely say things like "Downward dog means your butts should be up high in the air" to see how they react and I tell stories and make jokes. One of the boys bugs back and says things like, "Mandy look it's you!" while pointing at a monster in a picture book. The girls sidle up next to me and say they want to talk or hang out and it's clear they just want to be with me. We all have a good balance of laughing and being goofy in our sessions along with time to turn inward, do our art, and listen*

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<sup>22</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>23</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>24</sup> Kohkum is the Cree word that roughly translates as "grandma" in English.

<sup>25</sup> Mosôm is the Cree word that roughly translates as "grandpa" in English.

*to soft music as we create, write, and imagine. It's completely natural now and a good fit. The "interviews" are the only part that feels somewhat contrived.*

### **Connections: Family and Friends**

Some students shared about how their parents were always home and did not have a job; others shared how their parents worked such long hours that they were rarely around. Some students came from families where one parent had left, and they were confused and hurt by this abandonment. Others came from families with extensive multi-generational connections, sharing stories about their many interactions. Through learning about the dynamics of their home lives, I was honoured that some of the participants chose to trust me with their stories. It became evident that no matter what initiatives educators take at school to support children, partnerships with home will go a long way in re-iterating the importance of tending to their well-being and fostering a sense of wholeness.

The eighth research day had us re-visiting many of our established routines, as we began with a book, did some yoga moves, participated in a guided visualization, connected with our creative selves, and finished with a Sharing Circle. The story was McBratney's (1995) *Guess How Much I Love You*, which focuses on how a rabbit parent loves their little bunny so much that it is incomprehensible for the child. We spoke about those who love us and those we love, and worked on noticing where we felt this sensation in our bodies. A visualization that connects with sensations like this is titled Sphere of Light, which works to completely relax the body while remaining in the mental realm. This visualization provided students with an accessible entry point that enabled them to feel safe and supported throughout. After doing our yoga stretches and feeling into our bodies, I narrated the students through the visualization which had them experience the sensation of having a sphere of light gently move through every part of their bodies from the inside (Pura, 2002, p. 70) as they lay or sat down and were as still as they could

be, both physically and mentally. Then we transitioned into creating an open-ended art piece where I instructed the students to draw a scene that included someone who brings them joy, and then to write about this person and their importance. Each of them were able to come up with an idea fairly quickly in response to this directive. We ended with a Sharing Circle and students who were comfortable doing so displayed their artwork and read their writing to one other.

*Cormac:*

*My mom likes to go shopping. Her name is Francine. I think she enjoys shopping because she has a lot of stress in her life and shopping takes her away from that stress. She is important to me because she has always been there for me and helps me when I need it most.*

*Chloe:*

*West Edmonton Mall*

*My mom and dad*

*We like to go to the mall and look at clothes*

*It is fun*

*We can go shopping and take pictures.*



Figure 23: Someone Who Brings Me Joy

*Chloe:*

*I feel that I didn't do a good job on my picture.*

*I think that I kinda did a good job.*

*I wonder if I could do better.*



*Figure 24: Engaged in Artwork 1*



*Figure 25: Engaged in Artwork 2*

### ***Researcher Reflection***

*The body. It all comes back to the body. I love working with kids and providing the space and place for them to learn how to listen to their bodies in order to express themselves. As I care so*

*much about the four-part person as a way to view mental health and wellness, this work is a way for it all to be embodied. So it's not like I am talking about or at the body, but through it, for it, from it. This is how we can be well. Not suppressing or repressing. And my inner self can express itself by working with kids and allowing them to express themselves too. From front body to back body, from active standing poses to more passive seated routines, from sun salutations to moon salutations – the children are invited to feel the subtleties coursing through their veins as they breathe into the body parts where the sensation is felt the strongest. Some groan that certain poses are “too hard” or “hurt their muscles.” Some sit or lie down and participate in a more relaxed way – yet it is evident that they are paying attention. Still others love the challenge and push their physical limits each time. I put on upbeat music and get them moving their bodies in ways they didn't think possible. Yoga is the one activity – besides snack – that they always ask for and look forward to. By moving through downward facing dog, tree pose, an arm balance called crow, and many warrior sequences (to name a few), the physical and psychological space opens up for the students to be open to and experience a deeper existence. In that room together, we are able to imagine other ways to be. As we cool down and hold some of the seated poses for a few moments, I tell them stories from my life when I was around their age. By being playful in my bare feet alongside them and letting loose in this way, a younger version of myself comes forth, as does their responsible adult role.*

## **Health and Wellness**

As demonstrated in the above Researcher Reflection, much of the learning and interactions that took place in this research were housed primarily in the body. In order for one to experience health and wellness, health needs to be explored through paying attention to the nuances of one's body, and wellness embodied through the physical *doing* of movements and activities. When approached holistically by honouring all parts of being—as a four-part person does—health and wellness morph from being abstract concepts to lived embodiments. In this way, this research was more experiential than theoretical and more hands-on than cerebral.

To this end, the ninth day of our time together took place during the first week of the last month of school, and began what felt like the start of us all wrapping up our time together, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. While we continued revisiting many of the same routines, I introduced our final activities, began the individual interviews, and our conversations turned toward how the children could carry the skills and abilities they learned in our sessions together into their lives as they moved on without me. We started by reading a

children's version of *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1922/2011) that prompted in-depth conversations around what it means to be "really Real," as outlined in the text and discussed in more detail in the next chapter. This was followed by a few muscle relaxation activities, and then a repeat of the White Light guided visualization that the students had enjoyed the previous week. The theory involved in the muscle relaxation exercise is that people can isolate the tension that they carry in specific parts of their bodies, and then release it and allow that muscle to relax with the goal of achieving total relaxation. Following Pura's (2002) explanation, I asked students to lie comfortably on their backs as I narrated them through the exercise of concentrating on one muscle group at a time. I spoke aloud throughout the activity to outline how once the muscle has been identified, they tense and hold it tightly for a count of five, then release it completely (pp. 68-69). We then participated in the Elastic Band Imagination Exercise, where I narrated the students through the experience of stretching an imaginary elastic band into many different configurations requiring physical movements (Pura, 2002, pp. 47-48). This activity brought forth many laughs while allowing students to get in touch with their bodies in an imaginative way. Then we moved from the physical to the mental, going through the healing white light visualization, where a ball of white light travels through the inside of their bodies, giving love and energy to each part. I shared how our bodies speak to us and provided the opportunity for them to experience this.

I explained to the children how there were only a few weeks left of the study and how I hoped that they would continue to remember the breathing, yoga, visualization, artwork techniques, and creative writing prompts even once we were no longer meeting on a weekly basis. We then transitioned to discussing images that speak to us and we leafed through magazines to pull out pictures that we somehow felt a connection to in our gut, and then we



wrote about this and what it made us think of in our lives. The students connected with the opportunity to choose a picture from a magazine rather than having to create something from scratch. It is evident from the few included pictures and write-ups that follow that students were able to remember significant moments in their lives based on photos or artwork that they observed, and they were able to re-conjure the feelings connected to those moments. Following this activity students finished their mandalas and then had free time to do any artwork they wished. The fluid experience of time and how each participant wished to spend it was a welcome change of pace.

For our closing Sharing Circle, I asked students to once again share a one-word embodiment. Student responses were varied and I appreciated their honesty, including feelings of being anxious, excited, tired, happy, lonely, and bored. This week and onward I began the individual semi-structured interviews that built upon students' art creations and creative writing over the previous weeks together. Once the large group activity concluded with the Sharing Circle, I sent the students back to class and called one student at a time to conduct the interview "reflections," as an opportunity to look at their previously created art pieces and life writing and to respond to questions from the researcher. For sample interview questions that I used to begin our conversations, see Appendix B.

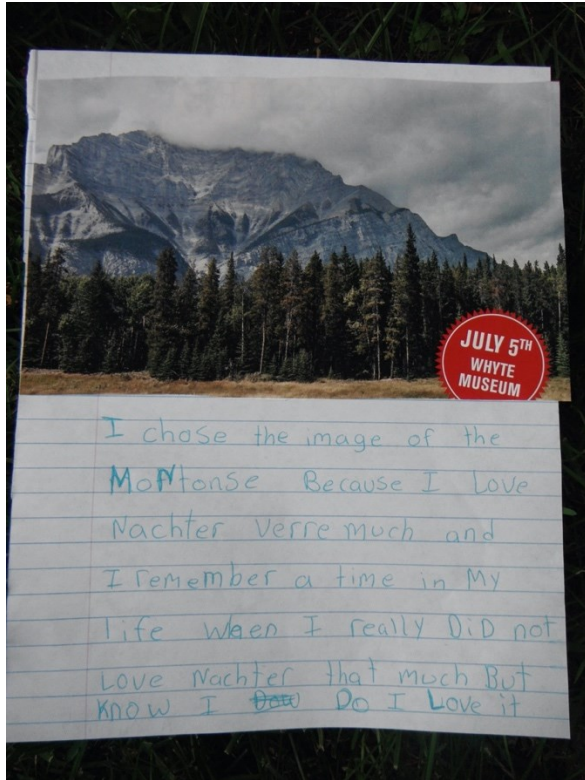


Figure 26: Magazine Image and Reflection 1

*Claudia:*

*I chose the image of the mountains because I love nature very much and I remember a time in my life when I really did not love nature that much but now I do. I love it.*

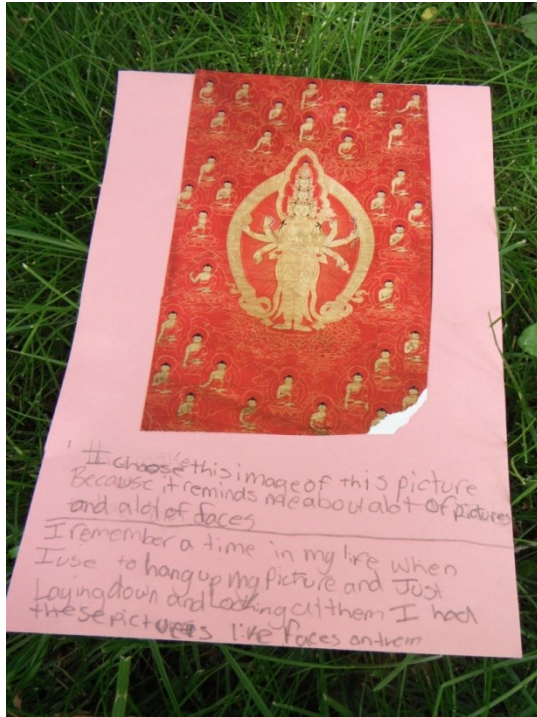


Figure 27: Magazine Image and Reflection 2

*April: I chose this image of this picture because it reminds me about a lot of pictures and a lot of faces. I remember a time in my life when I used to hang up my picture and just laying down looking at them. I had these pictures like faces on them. [to accompany image of Hindu goddess]*

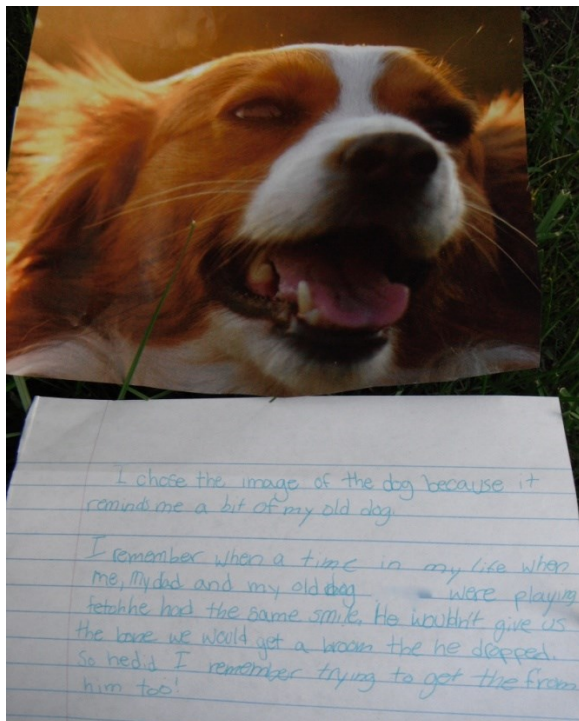


Figure 28: Magazine Image and Reflection 3

*Veronica: I chose the image of the dog because it reminds me a bit of my old dog. I remember a time in my life when me, my dad, and my old dog were playing fetch. He had the same smile. He wouldn't give us the bone. We would get a broom then he dropped [it]. So he did. I remember trying to get the [broom] from him too!*

Students shared much about their lives with me throughout our time together, most of which I captured on audio. The following found poem titled *Life* highlights poignant moments that stood out for me when sitting with the transcriptions, surrendering to them and allowing some of the many shared pieces to catch me. What follows are the words of the participants, inviting us as readers, into their lives.

### ***Life – A Found Poem***

*Bruce*

*[On the bus] we usually do two to a seat right now.  
It used to be me and Cormac  
and then me and someone else but I got –  
I annoyed them so much they left.  
I didn't wonder why because I didn't like them sitting with me.*

*Bobby*

*When my mom's at work, she wants us to stay inside  
just in case something happens.  
I don't like my little brother.  
He's annoying, you know.  
I have fun with him when I go swimming 'cause I can splash him.  
My mom says I have OCD because I always count,  
like I always count tiles and all that.  
Mom said I need a stress ball to fiddle with.  
I sort of get obnoxious.*

*My half-sister moved out  
because she was being too bossy  
and my mom just didn't want to deal with it anymore.  
She brings me games and I'm banned from playing games right now  
'cause I was picking on Simon  
and I punched him in the face because he was like really annoying me  
and he was like sort of choking me,  
so that wasn't nice, no.*

*Veronica*

*And especially – I can't really think in school anymore because my dog's gone.  
I'm like, "What am I going to do without him there or anything like that?"  
It's been two months and it's still harder for me.*

*[crying]*

*It's frustrating.*

*You know if you have to cry, I don't want to cry in school.*

*That's just one of the places I don't want to cry.*

*But I only did it for a while.*

*Then I kind of like,*

*you know,*

*maybe it's a good idea to just be a little happier right now*

*'cause this might not be the best place to be all grumpy and everything.*



Figure 29: Veronica: Drawing of "Sad/Lonely"

*Eric*

*I live in Plum Band.*

*I'm off, a bit away from the highway  
and away from the townsite.*

*A little ways away from neighbours.*

*There's two twins that live near me  
and then my kohkum and mosôm, they live a bit farther.*

*I bike over there.*

*And I don't go to the twins' place because they have mean dogs over there.*

*They killed two dogs and they almost got my cousin.*

*I take the long way around.*

*Normal sunshine, normal clouds in a way.*

*I bounce on my trampoline or bike or walk.*

*[I live] with 9 people.*

*My uncle,*

*my three cousins,*

*my kohkum,*

*mosôm,*

*my mom,*

*my dad,  
and my brother.  
My cousins live in the same house.  
I share a room.  
I feel sort of mad and happy, because my cousins always bug me.  
So that's why I get money from my piggy bank,  
ride my bike to go to the store in the townsite—  
it's far away from my house.*

*For alone time, I bike down to the store,  
I just go visit my mosôm's.  
That's a break but there are ten people living there too.  
I go hide in a space downstairs,  
like my cousins live down there and my uncle,  
so I just go into a corner where I don't hear,  
I put my earbuds in and my iPad or iPod  
and I just listen to music until I'm ready to go back up.*

*Cormac  
I want to be a game designer.  
And design video games and stuff.  
Or an artist.  
Just, like, drawing.  
I like doing art and it's really fun.  
When I'm doing art I just feel like no one else is there and I do my own thing.  
Usually I'm relaxed  
but sometimes I'm stressed because I can't do something perfect  
or I keep messing something up.  
I don't like being distracted by others  
so if I pretend no one is there then I don't get distracted as easily.  
At school,  
in my head I just say, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah"  
and just block everybody out.  
At my home  
I just go into my bedroom and read most of the time.  
When I'm content I'm usually reading because it's quiet and relaxing.*

*Henrick  
School's fun.  
It's not a big, busy school.  
But sometimes it's just boring and all that stuff.*

*Veronica  
I listen to music.  
I like doing the rainbow loom stuff that's came out.  
I like singing in public.*

*When I was littler I was kind of okay, I want to do this when I get older.  
I don't know why but I want to do acting.  
I like dancing.  
To any kind of music that has a good beat that I could dance to.  
I feel kind of like that's the only time I have,  
like I can dance,  
like how I'm feeling.  
Sometimes I'll do that or I'll just dance to be happy.  
'cause that's the only time I feel like it helps myself  
and I can't see anybody watching me and so...*

*I performed one time  
Dancing somewhere in a nearby town, I can't remember.  
We did a hip-hop dance in front of millions of people.  
It was scary.  
I was like I couldn't remember, but then I remembered, right.  
I don't have any dance group anymore.  
They closed  
because there's not enough people to be dancing,  
so I just like, I quit...  
Sometimes it's even just fun to dance.*

*I like watching a channel called Family Channel  
They have a show called the Next Step and I really like that show.  
It's where dancers are, it's drama and all that.  
There's a lot of shows that I like that are most of the things that I do and I want to do.  
Like I don't want to be a dancer and have that much drama, right.  
Like just a bunch of drama and more drama every day.*

## **Coming to an End**

Throughout this project, it became very clear that children experience the realm of the sacred in their lives alongside the mundane. When I tried too hard to choreograph a special moment that I hoped would be experienced in a sacred way by the participants, it usually felt contrived (such as my wishful expectations regarding what they might share during our circle time at the end of each session). Alternately, when I simply remained attuned to each individual child, when I was able to meet them exactly where they were at (such as when doing yoga together with soft background music), experiences of the realm of the sacred were paramount. This holds significance for pedagogical practice, as it highlights the importance of maintaining

fluidity and openness within classroom settings, in order for the sacred to be experienced. When educators are able to offer students our full selves—attuned and present to their lives—teaching and learning become sacred acts in and of themselves.

Accordingly, the final three research days became a way to put into practice everything that we had worked on in a manner that invited connectedness to self, others, and the sacred realm. By the tenth day the students and I were very comfortable with one another, and our routines together unfolded quite naturally. On this day I deviated from the normal structure to surprise the participants with an activity that would allow them to build teamwork skills and practice taking initiative. We started by reading Shel Silverstein's (1976) *The Missing Piece*, which emphasizes that rather than looking for fulfillment outside ourselves, we might recognize that we are complete just as we are. A lively discussion ensued as the students processed the message of the text. After guiding them through a few relaxation and positive imagining activities, I explained that we were going to make nachos together and eat them as a group. Students got excited as I explained the details, and how this was a chance for them to work together. Before moving to the school kitchen, they each needed to sign up for a task (such as getting the oven and pans ready, grating the cheese, chopping the vegetables, scooping the salsa and sour cream into bowls, etc.). In the kitchen, the students worked alongside one another and occasionally bumped into their peers as the noise levels rose with excited chatter in anticipation of our shared meal. When we ate at nearby tables, the satisfaction in their stomachs became the focus as they tried new toppings or foods and enjoyed the interactive nature of eating together. After this the entire class was booked in for swimming lessons, so I joined them for that experience and we adapted the day accordingly.





*Figure 30: Teamwork Activity – Making and Enjoying Nachos*



*Figure 31: Yoga Explorations*

Our eleventh and second-last day took place mostly outdoors. Mirror Lake School had a huge outdoor space, much of it covered in trees and shrubs that the students were allowed to explore. First we reviewed and practiced some basic breathing techniques and yoga stretches that the students requested, as a way to connect with ourselves at the start of the session. Then we looked at some books and online pictures of artwork created by Andy Goldsworthy<sup>26</sup>, an artist who uses items found in nature to create installations, which then deteriorate naturally after he

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<sup>26</sup> Andy Goldsworthy is a British artist and naturalist who creates art out of objects he finds in nature, photographing the pieces immediately following their creation and over time. He seeks to better understand nature by actively participating in it. See the Artist/Naturalist link at [www.morning-earth.org](http://www.morning-earth.org) for examples of his work.

has photographed them. Then we took our healthy snacks outdoors and began collecting items that students wished to use in their own nature art instalments.

Working in small groups or independently, participants found many different natural pieces and decided upon creative ways to arrange them. I emphasized the value of allowing their emotion and intuition to guide their choices rather than logic alone. Many of the creations are shared here in photographs, and while a few students were distracted or disgruntled outdoors (primarily due to the bugs), most used this time to connect with their inner artist. I photographed each of their creations, and when we were back in our classroom I explained that I would bring in these photos for them to our final session. Students continued working on their mandalas and any other art projects they wished to finish for the remainder of our time, and we ended with a group Sharing Circle. Once students had returned to their regular class, I pulled some out for their individual interviews.



*Figure 32: Cormac's Nature Installation*



*Figure 33: Bobby and Steve Exploring in the Woods*



*Figure 34: Bobby's Nature Installation*



*Figure 35: April's Collected Natural Items*



*Figure 36: Bruce and Steve's Nature Installation*

Our final day together took place on one of the last days of school and students were exuberant about the upcoming summer holidays. It was a day of goodbyes and pulling together anything that needed to be finished, as well as conducting more individual interviews. We began by reading aloud *The Ugly Duckling* (Andersen, 1843/2009), retold by Delmege (2012), which the students understood to mean that even if someone appears as though they do not fit in, they

are unique and special in their own right. Following our discussion and snack, I guided the students in some yoga moves and breathing activities as a way to honour our bodies.

Finally, I gifted each student with their final sketchbooks as well as photos of them and their artwork that I had taken over the past eleven sessions, and outlined how they could take their art folders with all their creations (I had taken photographs of everything they had created). Students were excited to look things over and to work on any unfinished pieces that they wanted to complete using my art supplies. Then I introduced our final art activity, which included the creation of a transitional object for each child to keep as a memory of the work we did together—this object was a sketchbook for them to use as they wished. On this day we designed a cover for it, using collage and mixed media techniques. I explained that these books might be a creative space to draw, write, and process emotions. Students were very excited about the gifts and expressed their appreciation for the open-ended guidelines. They all worked eagerly on designing a creative cover. I also encouraged them to write a letter to themselves in the book, saying “think of what you would like to tell yourself when you will be my age.” Some of them, like Bobby’s excerpt included below, seemed to struggle with moving their thoughts to what life might be like in the future and instead maintained their focus on what was directly affecting them in that moment.

Letter to himself in 20 years:

*Dear Bobby,*

*I hope you feel way better than you feel now. And get better at life so everything. I hope I get my video games back.*

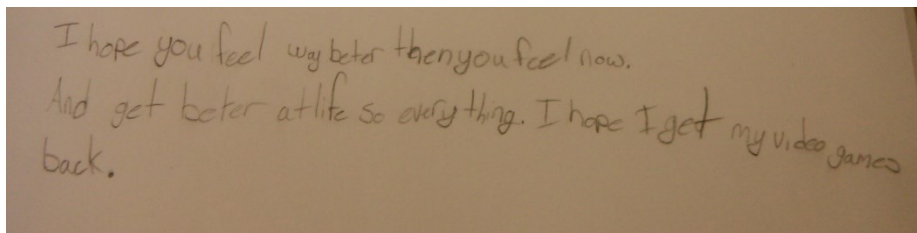


Figure 37: Bobby's Note to Future Self

There was an energized camaraderie in the room as the students processed this time we had spent together. Everyone (including me) was distracted by the fact that the school year was ending soon. The final day had an anti-climactic feel, which was interesting for me to process later on my own time. In all, the weeks together felt very rich and interactive in a way that had allowed students to connect with all aspects of themselves as four-part people.

Upon concluding our final session together, I asked each participant present to write down either what they would most remember about our time together, or three things that they would want me to remember about them. A sense of personality continues to emerge through the reading of these few words shared by participants.

### ***Part of Me – A Found Poem***

*I'm Batman.  
The food.  
Art.*

*Remember the good times we had in the class.  
You're a good friend well person because you help people you think of others.  
You helped me so if you need help remember the yoga, talks, breathing, or even us!*

*That I get sick easy.  
Yoga.  
That time when I was the only girl.  
That on spinny stuff I get dizzy my head feels funny.  
That's why I'd want you to remember part of me.*

*The healthy snacks.  
Yoga moves to keep your body flowing.  
And the art work because it's very fun.*

*Yoga  
Drawing  
Art  
The food  
Painting*

*My friendliness.*

*My quietness.*

*My face.*

*I chose quiet because I am quiet.*

It was a significant moment for me, this project coming to a close. Upon reflection, I recognized the reciprocal relationships that had developed: I got in touch with a younger version of myself by learning how to be playful, to go with the flow, and to prioritize process over product. By “younger version of myself” I refer to a concept highlighted in Jungian psychology. Lindley (1993) quotes Jung’s words: “‘In every adult there lurks a child . . . . That is the part of the human personality that wants to develop and become whole’ (Jung 1954, 169-170)” (p. 44). In reference to quality pedagogy, Lindley (1993) outlines that “the source of the energy that drives good teaching—is the child in the teacher” (p. 44). This “child in the teacher” was the energy that drove the research project. Through this work, my own relationships were enhanced: with the participants, with others in my life, and with myself. While there is no line between childhood and adulthood, the drive to become whole is experienced throughout life. As Lindley (1993) outlines, “The source of good teaching—connection to the child within us—is simultaneously the source of our reward, because our reward *is* connection, to our students and to our own inner selves” (p. 57). In this way, the work comes around full circle.

At the same time that I allowed the younger version of myself to shine, the older and wiser “adult/teacher” aspect of each child came through as well. It was evident that the student participants each learned so much—mostly that they can find their response within themselves and do not need to solely seek answers externally. Through their ability to connect with their own “knowing adult within” (Lindley, 1993, p. 45), quality experiences were had by both the children and the adult (me), both resulting from and enhancing this connection. Nonetheless, throughout the entire study some of the participants did not want to share what was going on for them or to

talk about their emotions. I learned to honour their degree of sharing and worked at not getting caught up in my own feelings around this. In the process, I was obliged to allow life and our interactions to unfold, while I sought to be present to my own inner experience in response. Lindley (1993) further guided my making sense of this, as he reminded me that “it is not the content of the journey that matters, but the doing of it” (p. 60). In this study, I sought to create a supported environment in which the students could experience life as four-part people, and through this learn some valuable skills and strategies as well as hone the ability to turn inward and to trust themselves. Getting to know these children as complete beings over the whole school year felt important to me as a researcher, and the significance of the study being built on relationship—with self and other—is not lost on me. Connection is key.

Chapter Seven will build upon these research stories by focusing on areas of theory and practice that emerge from some of the themes evident in this research. By explicitly paying attention to the concerns raised throughout the first six chapters, Chapter Seven will outline some ways in which we might consider all of these stories and findings in the field of curriculum studies. Further, it expands upon linking the particular (micro) data from the participants with the larger (macro) concerns currently facing educational settings in societies struggling with the legacies of colonialism.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: THEORY AND PRACTICE

This chapter explores themes that emerged in Chapter Six, with a particular focus on the role of time in the experience of well-being, an exploration of attunement as it links to living in an embodied manner, and the importance of being “really Real” or authentic in life. First, I take up Schwab’s (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) work about curriculum commonplaces as a way to frame the discussion around mental health and the sacred. Then I examine the main theme of disconnection and related sub-themes to link theory and practice. I also draw on the specific experiences of one student—Veronica—to explore and unpack the embodiment of transformation. By highlighting Veronica’s experiences as a micro example (her individual experience) to the main concerns outlined in this dissertation, I demonstrate the inherent linkages between part and whole on a macro level (the collective cultural concerns affecting mental health and wellness).

Throughout this research, I have noticed a tendency for educators, myself included, to seek simple responses for how to promote well-being and wholeness in children. Based on experience, it is essential to not allow this work to become overly programmed or prescriptive. It cannot simply be about a mindful minute or yoga sessions in classrooms. Rather, what is needed in schools is a central curricular and pedagogical commitment to the embodiment of well-being and wholeness as a way of life and being. Too often the culture of schools and the historical roots of schooling do not allow for deep wellness and connection to inner knowing. When provincial mandates leave out a focus on human beings as four-part people, the image of the child shrinks. It is only in attending to the body and the realm of the sacred in schools that the overall mental (and emotional and spiritual and physical) health of children will be prioritized.

In conducting this research and writing through a methodological approach that embraces wisdom traditions and an animated worldview, I seek to contribute to the conversation of how educators can better attend to the holistic well-being of children. Through attending to the voices of children while also recognizing my own personal healing that took place through this work, as well as considering the vital interaction between children and adults throughout this entire process, this research has inspired me to continue to support children in their ongoing growth and development.

### **Curriculum Commonplaces**

Throughout my career I have been interested in the intersection of theory and practice, and have worked to link the two as much as possible both in my writing and in the classroom. The seminal works of Joseph Schwab (1969, 1971, 1973, 1983) about *The Practical*, published on the cusp of the curriculum reconceptualization movement, are significant for understanding and developing both theory and practice in relation to this research. Schwab (1971) clearly articulates concerns about an over-prioritization of theory in the field of curriculum studies: “Educators have sought theory... as if such theories would be sufficient to tell us what and how to teach” (p. 493). The problem identified here is that “teaching which is coherent with theory often misses its practical mark” (p. 493). He outlines how educational thought that honours the practical can be translated into curriculum through “four commonplaces of *equal* rank: the learner, the teacher, the milieu, and the subject matter” (Schwab, 1973, pp. 508-509, emphasis in original). Milieu is defined as “the circumstances, conditions, or objects by which one is surrounded” (Merriam Webster, n.d., n.p.) and this commonplace is where my study has the most to say. Indeed, by considering these four commonplaces, researchers in the field of curriculum studies can find footing for how to ethically proceed in any discussion of research “findings.”

Initially, I had planned to use Chambers' (1999) four proposed challenges for Canadian curriculum theorists as the organizing framework for this discussion, which circle around *place* as an appropriate starting point. I later revised this focus as I realized that the project had less focus on place than originally anticipated. Upon reflection, Schwab's curricular commonplaces offered a valuable way to outline how the practices that characterize my research process are guided by theory. Schwab (1969) emphasizes the role of the practical: "a theory covers and formulates the *regularities* among the things and events it subsumes. It abstracts a general or ideal case" (p. 11). Indeed, I cannot think of any students, teachers, classrooms, and schools that focus on "regularity." Accordingly, the goal here has been to avoid this abstraction and to focus on the concrete lives and happenings in front of me. Schwab continues:

curriculum is brought to bear not on ideal or abstract representatives but on the real thing, on the concrete case in all its completeness and with all its differences from all other concrete cases on which the theoretic abstraction is silent. (p. 11)

Aoki's (1986) focus on the importance of the lived curriculum echoes Schwab's (1969) writing that curriculum work is enacted "in a particular locus in time and space with smells, shadows, seats, and conditions outside its walls which may have much to do with what is achieved inside" (p. 12). It is these varied factors (*milieux*) that played a role in my study, as the well-being and wholeness of children is affected by many external influences—that is, life and wellness at school is inherently connected to life and wellness beyond school.

As such, the disconnect experienced by children is linked to their mental health, their ability (or inability) to be embodied in their daily interactions, and their underlying worldview. This demonstrates the vitality inherent in linking theory and practice, for as Schwab (1969) states,

The stuff of theory is abstract or idealized representations of real things. But curriculum in action treats real things: real acts, real teachers, real children, things richer and different from their theoretical representations. Curriculum will deal badly with its real things if it treats them merely as replicas of their theoretic representations. (p. 12)

This study honoured and prioritized the real children and real acts that took place in the research space over time. Wholeness and well-being are complex concerns, and I had to decide how to best proceed with the students each week. This chapter works to make sense of the data in a way that speaks to the colonial legacy of relationship denial—external and internal—identified at the outset. Now, I wonder how the theory and practice of this work speaks to the interior relationship denial experienced by so many children. The curricular commonplace of milieu provides a guide to unpack the organic generativity and significance of the work I did with participants at Mirror Lake School.

### ***Milieu***

In 1983 Schwab wrote about milieu in the plural, articulating it as the “milieux of teaching-learning” (p. 241), and in so doing emphasized the multiplicity of situations and circumstances that comprise the teaching and learning dynamic. It is in these generative and interactionary spaces that milieu becomes an organizer for the discussion in this chapter. As one of the four original curricular commonplaces outlined by Schwab (1973), milieu implies “references to community” (p. 503). The etymological origins of the word milieu imply “surroundings, medium, environment,” “1894, from French *milieu*, ‘middle’” (Online Etymological dictionary, n.d.). In considering the lives of children and wondering what they find themselves “in the middle of,” one is strongly pointed to their surroundings and environment. Schwab (1973) articulates manifold milieu: “the school and classroom in which the learning and

teaching are supposed to occur” (p. 503) as well as “the family, the community, the particular groupings of religious, class, or ethnic genus” (p. 503). The new ethic exemplified by this study that took place over many months, sought to engage the student participants through acknowledgement of the many milieux of their lives. I took to heart Schwab’s call to acknowledge the students as both individual and social beings. In 1969 he wrote, “learners are not only minds or knowers but bundles of affects, individuals, personalities, earners of livings. They are not only group interactors but possessors of private lives” (p. 9). As laid out in Chapter Six, I thoughtfully planned and enacted the circumstances and conditions of the research activities with the students in a manner that allowed them to connect with their private inner lives as well as with one another in a meaningfully curated way.

I echo Schwab’s (1969) commitment to bring together members with experience and expertise in each of the four commonplaces in order to make a practical contribution that will come “to bear on curriculum problems by communication with one another” (p. 21). In this light, I wish to draw upon understandings of the important role of milieu in considering the weight of this research on the overall well-being of children. In considering my claim in Chapter Two, that the research is in response to the relationship denial caused by colonialism—particularly the disconnect young people feel in relation to their inner wisdom and knowing—three main learnings have emerged.

When a teacher wishes to be practical in a four-part person way, the three core considerations that arose are: 1) Notions of Time; 2) Attunement; and 3) Being “Really Real.” All three will be expanded upon later in this chapter. Schwab (1983) writes how “curriculum reflection must take place in a back-and-forth manner between ends and means” (p. 241). I take this back-and-forth as comprising all four curriculum commonplaces (teacher, learner, subject

matter, and milieu) as well as theory and practice. Herein, I use milieu as the primary organizing structure for the discussion, given the current state of education (underfunded and overcrowded, with ongoing debates in my home province about what is of value and worth) as well as the current state of the world (in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as navigating how to best dismantle the systemic racism pervasive in many institutions, governments, and countries worldwide). This follows Schwab's (1983) clarification that "it is only by consideration of the present state of the curriculum, the present condition of students and surrounding circumstances, all in light of the commonplaces equally, that a decision to favour one or another is justified" (p. 241). In considering these contributing factors, milieu best honours the situations and lived circumstances of the student participants in this study.

In what follows, I reflect on some of my own transformative experiences as explored through self-study, followed by a poignant example shared through Veronica's found poem and a discussion about Veronica's transformation. This is done as a way to honour the complexity of the struggles outlined throughout the work and the essence of the responses we might have. The chapter continues with an exploration of the three main themes emerging from the research and how these themes manifest in pedagogical settings through both theory and practice.

### ***Self-Study***

Building upon Schwab's (1969) four curriculum commonplaces, Clarke and Erickson (2004) outline self-study as a fifth commonplace, asserting that it is the "‘somehow’, a way for an educator to know, recognise, explore, and act upon his or her practice" (p. 207). While these authors outline self-study as it relates to teachers, I venture that self-study also applies to educational researchers and that self-study may be an effective way to link theory and practice,

knowing and doing, for research participants and students, if modeled well by researchers and teachers.

Self-study's key feature is that it informs educators' work and provides educators with an opportunity to inquire into our work in "systematic" and "rigorous" ways (Clarke & Erickson, 2004, p. 201). In this manner, "self-study is also an active enterprise with outcomes more often represented as *teacher knowing* (where one's practice is always in a state of evolution) rather than *teacher knowledge* (where one's practice is viewed as relatively fixed and static)" (p. 201, emphasis in original). In the context of this work and research, the clarification between *knowing* and *knowledge* is key, as it makes the teaching and learning endeavour active rather than passive. It also speaks to the different types of curriculum outcomes emphasized in the provincial Programs of Study. The focus on inert knowledge outcomes at the expense of dynamic outcomes based on attitudes and skills offers both teachers and learners a very different educational experience. As this dissertation research suggests, the dynamic, active knowing that engages students in all aspects of the process enhances their well-being and contributes to their sense of self. I recommend that self-study be considered not just as *teacher knowing* but as *learner knowing*, an embodied way of learning that is markedly different from *learner knowledge*.

Self-study, in this manner, is an active and inquisitive endeavour. Clarke and Erickson (2004) outline how inquiry is required for professionalism, for "without inquiry, one's teaching practice becomes perfunctory and routinised" (p. 203). The same idea can be connected to the self-study of learners, for without inquiry, *learning* also becomes perfunctory and routinised. In this dissertation research, the weekly times with participants were designed to invite inquiry about wholeness and well-being while contributing to students' ongoing growth and development of self-knowing.

## Personalizing Self-Study and Transformation

In the process of completing the final version of this dissertation, I have also been reading—specifically reading examples from other curriculum scholars witnessing poignant tales from their own lives. Jodi Latremouille (2016) wrote about her visceral experience of a modern hunting tradition and how it has shaped her. Lesley Tait (2016) shared about living connections to the land and a grounding found via the rocks in her pocket and in the hands of her children. The writings of these colleagues, as well as discussions with my supervisor Dwayne Donald, remind me that I have stories, too. If, as Battiste (2013) pens, “stories are a rite of passage,” a way to “engage in self-transformation” (p. 17), then I have one more to tell.

### *Jumping in with Both Feet: A Rite of Passage*

*When it comes to living life with gusto, I have never been afraid of taking the plunge. I recall a hot summer weekend the month before I began grade 11, camping and exploring with a group of friends in Whiteshell Provincial Park, on the Manitoba side of the Manitoba/Ontario border. We hiked, we swam in the many lakes, we skidded down Pine Point Rapids as our sandals hydroplaned on the water flowing quickly over the rocky Canadian Shield, we star-gazed, we played hide-and-seek in the dark, we sang, we kept on the lookout for wildlife. And one afternoon the adventurous ones—myself included—walked up a huge outcropping that overlooked one of the lakes with the sole purpose of cliff jumping into the deep, dark water below. As with many teenagers, there was much show and bravado despite the inner fears we each harboured. I wore a bright red one-piece swimsuit, forever etched in my mind, as a snapshot of me mid-air depicts. A few strangers and others from our group had jumped before me, so I felt reassured that there were no rocks to hit beneath the surface of the water. None of my close friends had yet taken the plunge. My crush was vocal about his fear, as were some others. In the midst of our group chatting about it, I said nothing aloud as I turned, took one more look over the edge, and then simply stepped off, trusting that it would all work out. I remember thinking that I didn't want to talk about it, I wanted to do it. While my body ached a little from the impact with the water at least 10 metres below, the invigorating rush from the freefall accompanied by the excitement of doing something new and somewhat risky brought me back for more.*

*Jump ahead about five years. This time I find myself standing on the edge of a cliff near a waterfall in Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica. I'm here with my husband at the time—who just happened to be my crush from five years earlier—as well as two other couples. We were on a vacation getaway together after completing our 2-month final teaching practicum in various parts of Costa Rica. Again, we all stood on the top of a rocky ledge, pooled with small circles of water next to bright green foliage. The shimmering blue water below beckoned, and we observed*



*other travellers and locals alike take the plunge. No one in our group had yet worked up the nerve to do so, and I recall much hand-wringing and excuses to convince ourselves otherwise. Again, in the middle of our group discussion, I simply looked over the edge and jumped off. It was as if something inside me was beckoning to simply do it and not to over-stress the process. I can still hear the voices of our group members yelling out, “Mandy jumped!” Later they shared how they did not see that coming.*

*Various times in my life, but rarely, can I recall jumping off of the high diving boards in the big swimming pool complexes in the cities I’ve lived in. I much prefer the opaqueness of the lake or river water below. One last recollection: I returned to Costa Rica, albeit a different part of the country, about five years later with my siblings and parents. We were whitewater rafting for the day down the huge and beautiful Pacuare River, when our guide stopped us along the side by a rocky ledge that offered the perfect spot to cool off and jump into the water, as he demonstrated. It was less of a vertical than the previous two, yet still sparked an adrenaline rush. Why not? I figured, as I jumped into the refreshing water below.*

### ***Transformation Embodied***

This research study became a transformative “rite of passage” (Battiste, 2013, p. 17) for me as a four-part person. It provided a tangible opportunity to put into action ways of being that contribute to children’s overall well-being, while also witnessing their own experiences of wholeness. It required me to jump in with both feet, to be fully present and immersed in the research experience. While my cliff jumping encounters allowed me to be fully embodied and operating less out of my head knowledge, it was not an easy or thoughtless decision each time I jumped. It was simply an active knowing, from the inside out, that *jump* was what I needed to do in those moments. This active knowing is the only way that I could have connected my doing with my being—passive knowledge would have rendered me immobile in those moments.

As an educator, this moment-by-moment presence and awareness of what we are called to do—in each particular circumstance and interaction—is paramount. As a researcher, I was able to put active knowing into motion throughout every stage of the process. The data was dynamic throughout the many overlapping stages: approaching, making, collecting, analyzing, and expressing the data. Transformation for me took place during each stage. It happened through

active knowing: inviting and allowing the main ideas that emerged to impact not only the students but me as a researcher and educator.

The field of curriculum studies invites a broad view of what constitutes curriculum, in stark contrast to the limiting perspectives taken by many Ministries of Education. One way that curriculum has been defined is as “something like life itself” (Hurren, 2018, p. 164). Another perspective is that it is a way “for teachers to appreciate the complex and shifting relations between their own self-formation and the school subjects they teach, understood both as subject matter and as human subjects” (Pinar, 2012, p. 34). Related to both students and subject content, then, it is important to recognize how “practices related to curriculum theory and narrative theory... allow us to understand (define) ourselves and others” (Almash, 2020, p. 141). Further, as van Manen (1997) emphasizes, projects based in the human sciences “often have a transformative effect on the researcher” (p. 163). In this way, transformative action is performative action (Casey, 2009), where it is something that is *enacted* or *done*, not simply read about or imitated. Researching with participants about wholeness and well-being also allowed me to experience enhanced wellness in my own life, by putting theory into practice.

Transformation—of myself as researcher and potentially of the student participants—is nothing new to the field of curriculum studies. Battiste’s words (2013) bear repeating: “Speaking in and through stories then becomes a way to engage in self-transformation,” (p. 17) a way of sharing what is emerging through *doing*. In life, as in research. In research, as in life. These are the milieux of teaching and being. Smits (2018), taking up the work of Hannah Arendt, emphasizes that this sort of doing is not a “subordinate form of engagement” (p. 183). The sort of doing that I refer to stems from a way of *being*, not simply in doing for doing’s sake. The ways of being that are commensurate with a four-part-person way of living are in touch with notions of

time as sacred, attunement, and being “really Real.” Transformation occurs when one’s doing is aligned with one’s being in this manner.

The entire journey of doctoral studies, and particularly this research project with the students at Mirror Lake School, has been a rite of passage, an opportunity for me to “take the plunge.” I was transformed precisely because I was willing to try new things, to step out of my comfort zone, to jump in with both feet. By *doing* the work, I immersed myself in life—with the students, with the theories, with emerging ideas and practices. In the past ten years, I have worked to tune inward in order to best turn outward by being “really Real.” My own transformation—as an educator and researcher, yes, but mostly as a human—has taken place because of my willingness to practice what I teach. That said, taking the plunge has required speaking some reassuring words (in my head or aloud), and a determination to support both myself and the young in our midst to be as well and whole as possible. As will be described in the coming pages, that can best be done through recognizing time as sacred, attuning to our inner selves as well as to others, and being “really Real.” Connecting with or attuning to our own inner life may be one way to be(come) “really Real” as Margery Williams puts it in *The Velveteen Rabbit* or *How Toys Become Real* (1922/2011). The main concept of the book is summarized in the line told to the Rabbit by the Skin Horse:

Real isn’t how you are made . . . . It’s a thing that happens to you . . . . It doesn’t happen all at once . . . . You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.

Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at

all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

(Williams, 1922/2011, pp. 12-13)

Understanding and acting upon what it means to be “really Real” is a way to experience wholeness and well-being, and was a main aim of this study.

### **Transformation: Inner and Outer**

In reviewing my time with the students at Mirror Lake School, grade-four student Veronica's transformation stands out the most. She embodied many of the characteristics that comprise living a life of wholeness and experiencing well-being, not because she had things figured out but because she was willing to face the difficulties of her life and to be present with the various emotions and experiences that arose. Veronica drew upon her inner wisdom to guide her through intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. Her journey is an ongoing reminder of the importance of not giving up, of having faith in ourselves, and of being willing to face the unknown without pushing away fear. As Taylor (2009) writes, “if someone asked us to pinpoint the times in our lives that changed us for the better, a lot of those would be wilderness times” (p. 78).

When I first met Veronica, she was in the midst of a significant “wilderness time,” struggling with the morphing of a friendship due to someone moving away, the loss of her beloved dog, a lack of focused attention from her parents, and an overall absence of clarity and confidence in who she was. By the end of the school year, through ongoing discussions and a weekly opportunity to be heard, Veronica no longer seemed like the sad, timid girl I had initially met, but instead embodied a genuine sense of strength, sense of self, and a wise perspective that guided how she carried herself in the world. In essence, she had learned how to love herself.

Here I share the ongoing attention paid by Veronica to the events and emotions that were guiding her life. Over the twelve weeks, her experience became a tangible example of what embodied transformation might look like, as she learned to understand “that all mental events, finally, are *within* us” (Hollis, 2013, p. xii). She spoke with me regularly, baring her soul’s sorrow and making the connections between the outer events of her life and her inner processing thereof. I had the honour of simply being there with her, of watching and listening openly. It was evident that while she could not initially make sense of everything taking place, she recognized the value in facing uncertainty and difficult emotions, because taking care of herself would be worth the effort. She was living proof that “wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness” (Brown, 2010, p. 125). By highlighting the transformation that emerged as Veronica recognized her own worthiness, I then contemplate and theorize what transformation might look like given the overarching concerns highlighted in this work. Veronica’s transformation is expressed in the form of found poems pulled together from conversations over four months. All of the words are her own, without interpretation.

### **Veronica’s Transformation – A Found Poem**

*Veronica*

*I like being alone.*

*But then my dog died the day before my tenth birthday.*

*And I like thinking about him.*

*Every time I think about him I want to cry because I miss him.*

*Yeah. I miss him.*

*My mom told me that he would be right beside me when I was in my cradle.*

*He would look at me for hours and hours.*

*And he was my best friend, right?*

*Yeah. But I have another dog as well – Echo.*

*But he’s very hyper and I’m not hyper that much.*

*So,*

*My parents are usually busy with the chores they have to do.*

*I cry a lot*

*because I don’t know what to do*

*without my dog  
or any of my friends there.  
I don't know what to do at all.  
My dad says, "You're all right, Ronnie,  
but I can't do really anything at the moment for you right now."  
Like, you know, because we're always so busy.  
Like he wants to help me, but what I can do, right?  
And I say, "I just don't know."  
Right?  
Yeah.  
Which is kind of hard.  
That's why he said that because he's like,  
"Well, I don't know what you want me to do  
so we can't do it at the moment until –"  
Yeah.  
He wants to be there for me,  
but can't do it at the moment because he has to go to work all the time  
and all that.*

*Once in a while – like at home – I like to be alone, just by myself.  
Maybe like talk to my friends on my iPod or something.  
I listen to music.  
I like doing the rainbow loom stuff that's came out – just came out a couple months ago.*

*I don't know what to do anymore.  
It's very confusing.  
So I don't really know what to do really  
because a lot of stuff is going on  
because we moved two years ago and  
we're not really finished doing other things and all that.  
It's really hard because I'm really lonely then.  
I just lay down or something and think about it  
and say, "It's okay, Ronnie," in my head – repeating it.*

*When I'm upset I like to be alone.  
I usually – if I'm upset –  
I'll go down to the wood, like the bush, and stay by myself.  
I feel like it's a better place to be by myself and alone.  
I walk around.  
It's so peaceful in there.*

*Well, you know how Brigit left? She was really like my only friend.  
And so I'm usually in the park walking around by myself.  
I don't really know what to do.  
I feel sad.  
Like I feel like one of my friends should be there*

*and I should have lots of friends  
where I could just go  
run around  
and play with them.  
I should be able to do that,  
but I don't have friends where it's easy for me to bond with them.  
All those girls, they're different than me.  
They're more louder  
and they do different things than me.  
So I just don't feel comfortable around them.*

***I'm the only one  
that's really me  
that could bond with me.  
Just me,  
myself,  
and I.***

*You can't change anybody, really.  
You have to be yourself no matter what.  
You want to be friends with this person  
and they just don't like what you –  
like how you act or anything.  
You can't really change.*

***Life is always going to be complicated  
whether you're always happy  
or not.  
It's going to be complicated.***

*It's just very confusing for me right now actually.  
And not just being there for myself,  
but just I wish everybody knew how I'm feeling.  
I don't know.  
I've never been this alone before.*

***Once you get older  
you don't really show yourself  
as much as you did  
when you were little.***

\* \* \*

*If I have a moment where I need to be alone,  
I deal with it.  
I say,*

*“Well, I don’t think you could ever go in the past.  
The future is the future,  
but I know something good is going to happen soon.”  
I like being alone now.*

*Well,  
I want to be alone all the time for some reason.  
It’s always like this is –  
I should have alone time  
because I feel comfortable that way  
because it’s like I get to do whatever I want  
and I don’t have to get in fights with my sister or anything.  
I just can be free.*

*\* \* \**

*And my mom was like,  
“If you need to move to a different school by the end of the year,  
you can if you want.”  
Because they’re worried  
that I’m not going to have that much friends, you know?  
I don’t know why,  
but I don’t want to leave it,  
but then I want to have a lot more friends.*

*You know how I like – my dog died.  
I asked him to make me a promise  
that he wouldn’t die until my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday  
just because he was getting really sick.  
So it turned out he died the day before my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
I’m always going to remember that though probably  
because he was my first dog.  
He dug and  
he would sit there  
in the shade  
between the two cars.  
So I went there one day and started crying.  
I usually went to go see him out there and  
sit by him and  
pet him.  
He kind of had like a nose like a bear  
which was cute.  
When he was little,  
all he had was sisters.  
They would always bite his ears  
and everything*



*and so they put him in a different kennel  
and he was always lonely too.  
It's really hard because I'm really lonely then.  
Sometimes I want to pretend  
that it didn't happen  
and I want live on with it,  
but I can't somehow.  
But the worst thing is that I don't really –  
I don't know how to say this, but  
I'm very lonely  
because all my friends live  
like half an hour away from me  
and all that.  
So it's kind of like what should I do  
because I have no friends at all  
and I wish that it was like the city  
where there'd be a lot of kids around and –*

***I guess I got to know myself more.***

*Like, "Oh, I should do this."  
Because this summer I'm thinking I'm going to write a story.  
I like writing because it's like you can do imagination.  
You can do anything.  
If people want to do how their life was,  
but different names and everything, they can.  
So that's what I want to do.*

*Well, ever since Brigit left I can't –  
I don't feel like singing.  
I can't.  
I feel like I'm not loud enough  
or anything  
to do it anymore.  
I mean like if I sing,  
I can't keep it louder when I try to  
because I have no –  
I think it's because I have no friends  
or anything around here.  
I can't sing very well.  
I'm here alone, you know.  
I feel like I'm alone.  
and don't have any friends at the moment.  
I do have friends, but –  
I don't have any, really.  
I don't have much friends.  
I don't have a lot of friends.*

*I only have like three friends  
and that's not good.*

*\* \* \**

*When I lived in the city  
I was very different.  
But now I've mellowed down.  
I don't know if that's because I'm getting older  
or  
it's just because of how I feel now.  
Well, the most thing that I miss about having friends  
is where they can always be there for me.  
Like if I'm upset,  
they can always help me out with that.*

*Well, my cat's lost and we think she died from a wild animal.  
She's a gray tortoise shell.  
It has those orange stuff on them.  
And yeah. She's my cat.  
She's my precious.*

*I think my cat was probably about three, two.  
She was the runt of the litter.  
I miss her.  
My mom told me about it a couple of days ago.  
I kind of thought about it so I ran off  
I stayed by myself,  
close to the horse pasture sort of.*

*We've had her ever since she was a baby.  
I just sat and thought about it.  
I was all by myself for about a half hour maybe.  
I'm usually always by myself.  
My animals have been dying like this all the time now.  
For half an hour I was just sitting there  
and I heard something  
and I turned around  
and my sister's cat came running up to me and  
he started cuddling and everything.  
I think he was trying to make me feel better.*

*I've kind of gotten a little over what happened  
because I see my friends on the weekend.  
I hang out with my family all the time  
or I'll just go sit down on my bed and do stuff on my iPod –*

*maybe go on Instagram or something.  
Because I know some girls here are nice and everything.  
But now that that's happened,  
I like being alone.*

*Yeah, you know how my cat kind of ran away?  
Yeah, she came back.*

*\* \* \**

*I hope we talk to each other a lot for a couple more years.  
Maybe someday you could come out to our place or to the school again.  
And then we can talk for how's life been and everything.  
Yeah, because I think any age –  
I can be friends with anybody.  
Yeah. And you're my friend.  
And you're a little – you're a little older than me.*

*Yeah. I look up [toward the dog who passed away] –  
when I'm alone.  
Well, I don't really look up,  
I talk to him.  
I had a stuffy ever since I was three years old.  
He looked exactly like him.  
So I'll sit there and talk to him.  
We have pictures of him.  
I have a picture frame of him with me and my sister  
so I talk to that too or I'll look up.*

*Or he comes through dreams.  
Once he did.  
But I haven't seen him since.  
It was like two weeks after he died.  
I was just walking to my grandma's house  
because we live on the same property  
and I saw his face and everything  
so I ran up to him and started petting him  
and then I closed my eyes for a while  
because I was hugging him  
and then it turned out to be my other dog, Echo,  
so I think it was trying to mean "be there for him."  
Yeah, so I guess it's kind of like –  
I didn't know what the meaning was.  
It might be like, "be good with Echo."  
Like don't be upset all the time  
and not pet him*

*or play with him  
or anything.  
Be there with him all the time  
and I kind of thought that.*

## **Manifestation of the Core Concepts Exemplified in Veronica's Experience**

Veronica's experience of transformation highlights the confluence of the main realizations in this work. In contemplating Veronica's words and experiences, the curricular and pedagogical concepts of commonplaces, time, attunement and being "really Real" are ones that I dwelt with over a long time. Smith (2014) invites all curriculum scholars and educators to question how "the form of the world that is sold to the average person as a normal world is in fact a constructed world" (p. 73). Adults have normalized this world for children, with grave repercussions. Veronica was beginning to realize how there may indeed be more to the world than how it had been laid out for her. The feeling behind her impassioned words was that she was seeking something more, yet unsure of how or where to look for it:

*I don't know what to do anymore.  
It's very confusing.  
So I don't really know what to do really  
because a lot of stuff is going on*

Veronica was living in the midst of uncertainty, in the tension of the unknown. Linking back to self-study, then, how might educators be able to entertain this uncertainty in the classroom (Clarke & Erickson, 2004)? How might we be "critical consumers" of inert knowledge and "active constructors" of dynamic understanding and encourage the same in our students (Clarke & Erickson, 2004, p. 208)? These are skills that require particular attitudes and values regarding education. Montessori, first in an earlier piece, despairs at the loss of dynamism and how too often students are expected to repress themselves "like butterflies mounted on pins" and suggests instead that teachers foster "the spontaneous expression of their personality" (2009, p.

28). Smith (1999) invites spirituality into the discussion, as he highlights the importance of “finding a way to live a life of vital faith, a faith that does not banish the unpredictable in the name of new false confidences” (p. 3). This precisely demonstrates living in the tension of the unknown. Jardine (2012a) warns against trying to avoid unknowns and solidify certainty, articulating how “cutting ourselves off from the wild troubles of living a life in the midst of the living interdependencies of the world does not provide for a pedagogy left in peace” (p. 5). How might we recognize and put into play an understanding that “it is, after all, my life, the only life I will have, that is being or failing to be shaped, and thus too for every student and teacher” (p. 6)? How might we meaningfully shape our lives? This is something for educators to consider in our own lives as well as to take up with students.

Veronica was making strides toward ensuring that she would play an active part in shaping her own life, rather than allowing external factors to do so for her:

*When I'm upset I like to be alone.  
I usually – if I'm upset –  
I'll go down to the wood, like the bush, and stay by myself.  
I feel like it's a better place to be by myself and alone.  
I walk around.  
It's so peaceful in there.*

Veronica was learning what she needed in order to turn inward, to attune to her needs in a particular moment. She was able to experience a measure of peace by removing herself from her everyday world for a moment, and experience a different rhythm of time in a different place. This approach to life and living is applicable to both young and old alike. In this vein, by “establishing a link between the everyday world and higher vision” (Mayes, Grandstaff, & Fidyk, 2019, p. 136), educators, as well as the students we serve, may find a way to construct our world on our own terms (Smith, 2014). In my discussions with Veronica, at times it felt as though she was pendulating between two extremes—fully wanting to turn inward in order to turn outward in a

well-balanced way, or simply wanting to give up and collapse. I, too, can relate to these opposing forces in my life:

*It's just very confusing for me right now actually.  
And not just being there for myself,  
but just I wish everybody knew how I'm feeling.  
I don't know.  
I've never been this alone before.*

Veronica seemed to be holding the weight of the world on her shoulders, wanting to figure it all out while at the same time feeling utterly overwhelmed by it all. Jardine (2012a) offers wise words:

Relax. Even though it will take some work, the embrace of the world will start to hold up and make buoyant your efforts. You don't and won't need to hold the whole world aloft by your own wanting and doing. (p. 227)

I wonder how we as influential adults in the lives of children might support them in recognizing that this need not be an overwhelming 'all or nothing' approach, and that change happens in small steps. Transformation comes through attunement and through being "really Real."

### **Milieu and Self-Study: Commonplace "Containers" to Hold the Central Concerns**

The links between teaching and learning are inherent and obvious. One requires the other to come into fruition, and so the link is both necessary and natural. This does not mean that the process of making learning come alive is always simple or straightforward. Self-study, the proposed fifth commonplace (Clarke & Erickson, 2004), informs teaching practice (and research), which in turn impacts how students learn. On the flip side, quality student learning informs ongoing teacher practice, which plays out in self-study (p. 202). This hearkens back to the earlier discussion about the difference between knowing and knowledge, as related to both teachers and students.

Through drawing upon self-study as well as Schwab’s commonplace of milieu (1973), I seek to articulate in practical terms how mental health and wellness can best be supported when school personnel take into consideration the full context of the students’ lives and encourage them to reflect on how their *doing* and *being* are intertwined. Based on what I learned with the participants, the three main ways that educators can best attend to the wholeness and well-being of students include:

- 1) Offer students a slowed-down notion of time as sacred
- 2) Model and encourage attunement
- 3) Provide opportunities for students to be “really Real” and demonstrate what this is

### ***Notions of Time***

This work calls into question the fast-paced, production-driven focus on time that emphasizes the future, separates time from nature, and leaves no room for the sacred space of healing that requires a slower rhythm. Essential to this discussion is clarifying the difference between chronological time and kairotic time. “*Chronos* is clock time, linear time, and necessary for both colonization and for capitalism to do their work” (Seidel, 2014b, p. 146). Alternately, “the Greek word *kairos*, denot[es] the sense that things have their time beyond the capacities of specific measurement” (Smith, 2014, p. 82). Seidel (2014b) expands,

*Kairos* might be imagined as the time of love and compassion, of wonder, of open potential and unknown futures, and of yet unwritten rhythms and possibilities for all life on earth. *Kairos* is a qualitative and deconstructive timing which interrupts the line of *chronos*. (p. 146)

Kairos is the time of the sacred, of healing, of attunement, of being “really Real.” In Smith’s (2014) words, kairotic time embraces the understanding that “when the time was right, it

happened” (p. 82). Mi’kmaq scholar Adrian Downey and professor of Early Childhood and Critical Studies Pam Whitty (2020) together write about the long view of time, with Downey sharing his people’s conception of time. In the Mi’kmaq worldview, “nothing ever happens until it is meant to, or until the spirit moves us” (pp. 212-213). That is a difficult perspective to remember and understand for those of us mired in the Eurocentric logics of time. Elder Bob taught our class about how important it is not to rush, as rushing “trains the little ones to rush too” (B. Cardinal, personal communication, October 25, 2014). At the same time, he reminded us that paying attention, or *wâskamisiwin* in Cree, is a way of life, and failing to pay attention (in this case, to kairotic time, or the time of healing) could be dangerous. This is an admonition of the importance of attunement, made possible through sacred time. Veronica experienced how things happen when they are meant to with her cat, who had been lost but returned when she thought the cat had died.

*Well, my cat’s lost and we think she died from a wild animal.*

...

*And yeah. She’s my cat.*

*She’s my precious.*

...

*I think my cat was probably about three, two.*

*She was the runt of the litter.*

*I miss her.*

...

*My animals have been dying like this all the time now.*

...

*I’ve kind of gotten a little over what happened*

...

*Yeah, you know how my cat kind of ran away?*

*Yeah, she came back.*

Veronica experienced kairotic time as the time of love and compassion for her cat, and learned at age ten how things happen in their own time, when the time is right. While things worked out for



her cat, however, it was through her dog's death and her friend who moved away that Veronica had many opportunities to lean into experiences of time that were beyond her control.

Part of my hope and intention during my weekly time with the children at Mirror Lake was for our moments together to provide them with opportunities to contemplate how life comprises more than the experiences they face in school or at home each day. This is not to discredit the importance of their individual situations, but rather to recognize how they might best respond to their lived experiences in the moment beginning from a place of consciousness rather than overwhelm. Recognizing that time is both cyclical and ongoing, I am reminded that time is so much greater than this limited study comprising weekly visits with the students. Our well-being is influenced by the notions of time that we live by. Killsback (2013) offers an example of this, writing that “Indigenous societies were able to make accurate and intelligent observations from their spiritual understandings and their timeless place in the universe” (p. 110). If notions of time that guide us are rooted in interconnectivity, in timelessness, in kairotic time that circles back and around, wellness has a better chance of growing and developing within.

### *Bodily Relationship with Time*

Shajahan (2015) outlines how “with the introduction of the clock, time was delinked from human bodies, and human bodies from nature” (p. 490). When our bodies are disconnected from time and place, it becomes nearly impossible to live in an embodied manner, making it difficult to be connected to ourselves and others in schools and beyond. A response, then, might be that of “bringing awareness to our bodies” to “focus on the present” (Shajahan, 2015, p. 489) and stop privileging the mind and prioritizing the future. In order to do so, we might consider notions of time not rooted in colonial logic. This requires actively seeking to “undo this colonization of our bodies” (p. 494) brought about by “time [that] narrows or disrupts our focus on the body” (p.

493). I did this with the students in my study each week, through providing opportunities to listen to their bodies and slowing down through yoga, mindful breathing, and creative movement activities. April reflected on this bodily presence in part of the *Embodiment* found poem shared in Chapter Six:

*My auntie, she dances and every time I go there she teaches me.  
Sometimes dancing's hard work.  
She taught me how to do the beat.  
And she taught me how to do this and this, like this.  
Every time I dance I get really nervous and like—  
I have to think about something else.  
I just think:  
I'm there by myself and  
somebody's playing the music and I'm just dancing.*

While often nervous and unsure about what others thought of her, when April was able to dance and move her body in a way that felt true to her, this increased awareness helped her to remain focused on the present moment.

Well-being is stunted when the linear time touted in consumerist societies becomes unquestionably engrained in our life and living. By continually operating at high speeds and at high levels of intensity, our bodies begin to operate in a mode of hyper-vigilance. This heightened state of arousal makes it difficult to rest and self-regulate as a well-balanced four-part person. The following excerpt, from my March 19 Researcher Reflection shared in Chapter Six, speaks to the importance of this self-regulation:

*Another student, Henrick, who does not often share from the heart, stated today that our time together was a place where he was able to “stop and think” the whole time. To get away from the loud, crazy regular classroom environment, about which he expressed relief.*

When Henrick stated that he loved the research times together because it was a chance for him to experience an extended pause from the hectic school day/week, he was expressing his need to self-regulate and to slow down.

## *A Sacred Slowing*

Slowing down makes it possible to prioritize relationships and connections with ourselves, with others, and with the natural world. Pedagogically, “slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace without knowing outcomes” (Shajahan, 2015, p. 497). This might look like a shifting of what is viewed as the most essential educational outcomes and a prioritizing of the outcomes related to skills, values, and attitudes rather than knowledge alone. A shift of this sort may help promote balanced mental health for students, within and beyond the doors of the school. Shajahan writes that “we need to reduce the cognitive conceptual content so that we have ‘more time’ to acknowledge the body” (p. 497). This might look like slowing down the pace of a school day, where currently young children and teenagers are asked to quickly jump from one subject area to another. By recognizing that transformative learning takes place within a slowed down sacred space/time, educators may choose to organize their day in order for students to be able to engage with the subject matter as fully embodied four-part people.

Downey and Whitty (2020) invite us to pay attention to some central questions about temporality: “How does time intersect or section off learning? How does this affect our internal perceptions of time—our historical sense of time and our sense of the future? What notions of time does the school system privilege?” (p. 209). The authors outline how *temporality* is a subjective experience, while the term *time* refers to a “standardized measurement of the passage of existence” (p. 209). Indeed, “clocked time is an arbitrary practice” (p. 210) that humans have imposed upon the natural world. In many schools, the restrictions of clocked time continue to govern pedagogical decision-making, impacting the ability of children to be fully embodied and

present throughout the learning endeavour. In the field of curriculum, time and temporality intersect, as objective and subjective experiences are brought into play with one another.

One pedagogical response to trying to dislodge ourselves from the colonial logics that worship clock time and revere the mind over the body is to seek a more holistic notion of time. The time for healing—sacred time—is now, inwardly and outwardly. Slowing down, central to wisdom traditions, opens ourselves to an animated worldview that recognizes the inherent abundance in all life. “Slowing down, or decolonizing time, is . . . about improving our quality of life and work” (Shajahan, 2015, p. 499). This is what I did each week with the research participants, as a way for each of us to experience wholeness and well-being. Bobby, a very busy and active student each time we were together, reflected on how the slower movements that he was introduced to in the study had become part of his morning routine at home:

*I sort of get obnoxious.  
I always try some of the yoga moves upstairs  
when I get up.*

Bobby’s words, shared in the *Embodiment* found poem in Chapter Six, point to his recognition that his obnoxiousness could be tempered in a healthy way when he paid attention to his body and slowed down. Bobby demonstrates Shajahan’s (2015) conception that it is important “to embody different notions of time to access alternative sources of knowledge, including embodied ways of knowing” (p. 499). This is how we might begin to imagine other ways to be in the world.

Drawing upon aspects of Indigenous knowledge based on the medicine wheel, Davis et al. (2020) articulate how Indigenous education intertwines four main aspects: land based, community, relationships, and language. The joint, cyclical nature of teaching and learning based upon these aspects ensures that “the development of curriculum becomes fluid and the delivery spontaneous, rather than static and defined” (p. 124). This active, fluid delivery speaks to the

living concept of *knowing* that is intimately connected to life itself. The static *knowledge*-based curriculum no longer serves our children, as it disembodies them by privileging the mind and perpetuating the disconnect brought on by colonialism. Davis et al. (2020) outline how “curriculum is a fluid construct, responding to communal needs and influences, rather than a prescribed order based on general preconceptions of what constitutes a worthwhile academic program” (pp. 126-127).

### *False Futurism*

Another aspect of time that was raised throughout this research and study is the future-focused language used to frame the lives of children. Mythological notions of forward-moving “progress,” where past, present, and future are portrayed in linear, commodified, and compartmentalized terms, are not aligned with an animated worldview which values cyclical, kairotic time that focuses on ongoing interconnections. In the context of elementary schools, Seidel (2007) asks,

Is it this act of “forgetting forward” the lives of children, erasing their present and placing them in an un-real future of false promises, that might explain how a community of adults can allow children to spend five hours a day, for seven years of their lives in a dark and airless bunker and not be outraged? (p. 65)

The problem, as Seidel expresses, is that both consumer culture and frozen futurism are normalized. If educators view their role primarily as preparing children for “the future,” we are inherently limiting children’s options because we do not know what the future may hold. An example of this unknowing comes from Cormac, first from words shared in the Found Poem

*Family*, talking about his dad who operated large machinery at the nearby mine, and later in his words from the Found Poem *Life*.

*My dad works at the mine.  
He runs a bobcat and sometimes he's on the drag line.  
It's like a big machine and they haul big blocks of rock.  
It's like a big giant crane.  
One day, I want to be a game designer.*

Cormac emphasized that he was still unsure of what his future would hold. He was very clear in our discussions that his plan was not to follow in his father's footsteps career-wise, but to carve out a path for himself:

*I want to be a game designer.  
And design video games and stuff.  
Or an artist.  
Just, like, drawing.  
I like doing art and it's really fun.  
When I'm doing art I just feel like no one else is there and I do my own thing*

Futuristic focus is a perspective that takes away from the fullness of who children are today, in the present moment, and detracts from their human-beingness. In her own way, Veronica was beginning to recognize this as she faced the ups and downs of her life:

*If I have a moment where I need to be alone,  
I deal with it.  
I say,  
"Well, I don't think you could ever go in the past.  
The future is the future,  
but I know something good is going to happen soon."  
I like being alone now.*

In my discussions with Veronica, she was not rallying herself to enjoy being alone, but rather she knew that she needed regular self-reminders and experiences of how to remain embodied in the present. She was the one waking up to these abilities and gifts inside herself, she was transforming from the inside out. While I was there to support her in the journey of being herself, I was very conscious of letting her lead the discussion and her inner work. This sort of

transformation takes root through attunement. Educators are left having to take a very conscious position on how to not perpetuate an outlook of false promises about the future. Further, it is important to be clear about our role in the lives of children, which recognizes that the teaching and learning dynamic goes both ways. I wonder, might some of this be done by offering students multiple alternative understandings of how to wisely be in the world? Might educators instead learn from and alongside children how to connect with our inner selves in order to experience wholeness? By consciously working toward creating spaces that allow for deep learning and a connection with wisdom for life, these forces in the world may be given space to grow.

The normalization of futuristic thinking causes the present and past to be effectively blurred, a concern that this research faces by deliberately creating learning “situations . . . in order for students to break free” (Greene, 1993, p. 219). In this study, the participants and I worked toward attuning ourselves to a more life-giving bodily relationship with time, as opposed to the constricting future-focused time, industrial time, or teaching time. An example of this comes through Steve’s words from the *Embodiment* found poem:

*I’m a little tired.  
My legs.  
Kind of my whole body.  
Sometimes I get some water.  
Sometimes I just sit down.  
My head—  
it feels weird.  
I eat some food sometimes to help.*

Steve, a boy of few words, succinctly articulated what he would do in times where he felt his body needed his attention. This sort of intuition is rooted in an attuned way of being present to one’s needs as a four-part person.

## *Attunement*

Attunement is one way to turn inward for genuine guidance in order to turn outward to resonate with others. Checking in with ourselves is an embodied way to be, as it allows us to then attune to others externally. Attunement offers a way to proceed within the messiness of life that is in sync with both inner knowing and outer happenings. I envision it as akin to the “taking the plunge” story shared earlier, where one’s pedagogical being and doing are intertwined to the point that “jumping in (to life) with both feet” becomes possible.

While similar concepts have been discussed extensively in the field of curriculum studies, I propose adding the word *attunement* to curriculum and pedagogy, a term more often used in the field of psychology. *Attunement’s* roots lie in the 1820s, meaning “a bringing into harmony” (OED, n.d.), linked to the realm of music. Psychologically, “emotional attunement or mirroring can be defined as the ability to recognise, understand and engage with another’s emotional state” (Anyika, 2018). In terms of this research, attunement can then be defined as the ability to recognise, understand and engage (or bring into harmony) one’s own emotional state in relation to the outer world. The concept and action of being engaged with oneself is relevant for both educators and students. Irwin (2018) writes how “invoking curriculum is seeing curriculum differently” (p. xxxii). As she invites the “artist’s eye within the world” (p. xxxii), I invite the educator’s eye, a seeing from the inside out as a way to envision things within the world. Rendón (2009) refers to this as “educating for life” itself (p. 2), not simply for academics. Casey (2009) proposes that people *think* in an embodied way, which is a movement we make ourselves (from the inside out) (p. 140). If attuned, our way of being (and thus doing) is naturally more embodied. How might we as educators foster this in ourselves, and further, in our students? Battiste (2013) refers to Indigenous spirituality, a way to be attuned, as “balance, healing, or inner strength. It is



what is called *pimatisiwin*—a Cree word for good living..., and *netaklimk* in Mi'kmaq—living well” (p. 183). Adelson’s (2000) book outlines a Cree understanding of health, which translates as “being alive well,” (p. 14) which refers not just to bodily functions but to “the practices of daily living and . . . the balance of human relationships intrinsic to Cree lifestyles” (p. 15). Each of these ways of understanding the sacred role of being in touch with oneself speaks to attunement.

Children have much to teach the adults in their midst what “being alive well” might entail. Seidel (2014a) reflects on her time teaching grade 4, articulating that “from children . . .” she “learned to live life more graciously, more deeply, more slowly, more compassionately. With more breath” (p. 7). This has been my experience too. In one of our many heartfelt discussions with one another, Veronica shared vulnerably:

*I'm the only one  
that's really me  
that could bond with me.  
Just me,  
myself,  
and I.*

Veronica showed immense capacity to attune to herself and her needs in this moment, recognizing how she might offer herself exactly what she needed. Our in-depth conversations that took place in deserted school hallways felt like a pause from the frenetic outer pace of life. In another piece, Seidel (2014b) writes in a manner that embraces the “pause” (p. 144) as a way to attune. This attunement takes place through what she pens as “sensing the deep and infinite interconnections with the rest of life, of our own entanglement in all this, of the co-arising of all life and its going back into the world” (p. 144). We are interconnected. We are entangled. These problems are complex.

Attunement offers a way to engage thoughtfully with the world. Veronica was a living example of a young person engaged in the messiness of the world. Curriculum studies, through invoking this “artist’s eye” (Irwin, 2018), “educating for life” (Rendón, 2009), “sensing the deep and infinite interconnections with the rest of life” (Seidel, 2014c), is a field that seeks to bring this engagement with the world into consciousness. Attunement may be one way to do so, as it invites connection between self and other. In Veronica’s words:

*Life is always going to be complicated  
whether you’re always happy  
or not.  
It’s going to be complicated.*

By checking in with ourselves and attuning the relationship between ourselves and the world around us, we may find a way in the midst of the complications. Indeed, life being “complicated” is an example of the mental distress outlined earlier. Recall that mental health includes various stages ranging from no distress, to mental distress, to mental health problems, to mental illness. Mental distress includes the daily complications of life, most of which are necessary for growth and development (see EPSB, 2019). By attuning to her needs and not getting overwhelmed by the distress in her life, Veronica was modelling a way to view mental health as an integrated part of life.

While most human beings struggle for balance, life and its difficulties challenge our wellness and sense of balance, wherever we live and under various circumstances of living. Recall that Elder Bob articulates balance as being dynamic, not static. In this view, living with tensionality (see Aoki, 2005a) is akin to seeking balance, like an eagle continuously (yet elusively) seeks the “just right” wing position to achieve optimal flying conditions. The human struggle for balance is the desire for optimal living conditions. Further to this struggle, colonial ideology accentuates and fragments imbalances by teaching relationship denial. If we can face

the legacy of colonialism that pervades all of our interactions—particularly the ways that relationship denial manifests as disconnection from self, other, and the natural world—we might be able to attune inwardly so that we can step out in an embodied way. When we are attuned with ourselves, our *doing* connects with our *being* in a way that is “really Real.”

Some of the questions that have been weighing on me for some time are well articulated by Hollis (2013):

What does life ask of us, and how are we to answer that summons? Does life matter, in the end, and if so, how, and in what fashion? As children we all asked, indeed lived, these questions, and many of us have forgotten them in the steady drumbeat and reiterative abuses of daily life. But our choices reflect our values and our putative answers to these questions, whether we are conscious of them or not. Being more conscious then is both a summons and an obligation. (pp. xviii-xix)

In working alongside the children in this study, I noticed them regularly wrestling with big questions such as “what makes life matter?” At times, students sat and quietly pondered these questions, while at other times, they did so boisterously and actively. In Bruce’s brief words, from the found poem titled *After School* in Chapter Six:

*I ride my bike.  
By myself.*

Bruce’s way of processing was much more embodied than cerebral. I got the sense over our months together that the time Bruce felt most connected to life was when he was on his bike.

Big questions about finding meaning in life are not answered quickly or easily. Rather, it is the very act of slowing down and embracing wonder that provided students a different way of being—at school and beyond. By checking in with themselves and paying attention to what was going on inside, they were able to connect with their questions in a more embodied manner.

Bruce, with his sideways attention to the activities in which he participated, shouted out very pointed personal questions about how some of the suggestions about turning inward might impact him. Chloe's strong feelings and drive to be seen as a distinct individual within any group situation led her to seek recognition through acting out. Eric reflected on his family and the things they did together that bonded them as a group, and also saw how this interconnectedness might play out with his peers. In many cases, the opportunity for a conscious turning inward allowed the students the chance to truly be present to and in their lives.

My pedagogical responsibility here then, is to ask what is it that we have forgotten about children in the first place. I address this "we" to all adults in general and to educators in particular. Many of us may have forgotten to pay attention to the wisdom of an inner life, both in ourselves and in the lives of the children we meet. In capitalist consumer societies, priorities as to the purpose of educating our young have been skewed. How might educators settle in to each present moment face to face with children in order to fully attune to them, so that they are authentically seen and honoured in the here and now? As Lindley (1993) pens, "there is only one chance to reach them as they are, and it is right now. Next month, next year, they will be different people" (p. 13). Further, I also wonder whether many of us have forgotten that children are initially in close contact with their psyche, with their *felt* experience, and thus in school settings we too often train them out of this "knowing by feeling." As Hollis (2013) explains, this manifests as self-estrangement:

Over the years one may lose contact with the psyche as a self-guiding system and slowly disconnect from the reality of one's feeling life. Since feelings are natural spontaneous reports from the psyche—we do not choose feelings, they choose us—to repress or constrict them is to collude in our self-estrangement. (p. 74)

I fear that educators may be perpetuating this disconnect, not recognizing the importance of any and all feelings as natural, as necessary, in healthy development and processing. Of course, part of our job involves teaching and guiding students in appropriate ways to act on these feelings, so that they are able to self- and co-regulate. And yet I wonder, have many schools in capitalist societies become vehicles for ongoing self-estrangement? Recognition of psyche, of soul—of one’s inner life—as a self-guiding system is key to turning around the effects of this disconnect, in our own lives and the lives of our students. Without trying to glibly proclaim the value of the present moment at the expense of the future, through this research I purposely slowed down the busy rush of time in which students were enveloped. By providing students with a few hours of attunement each week, I sought to present an opportunity to turn inward, to check in with themselves about what truly mattered to them. This excerpt from one of my Researcher Reflections halfway through the project demonstrates the attunement to self as well as the attunement with each of the participants that was so vital:

*I participate alongside my students. They take their shoes off, I take off mine. They sit on the floor, I do likewise. They act crazy as they try to get into unique poses, I do the same. I quietly transition the group into stillness, their bodies respond. I set the tone with the choice of music, their body language softens. I offer of myself, they give from their innermost being. Give and take. Yin and yang. A dance. A subtle movement. It is wonderful, but it is not “perfection.” It is messy. It is real. At times it is loud and frustrating and confusing. But still, it is relational. The human connection is paramount, as always.*

I consciously worked to be an accurate mirror for the students, so that they could feel seen and heard, first outwardly, and then inwardly. As Richardson (2016) writes, “attunement is our ability to be fully and compassionately present with what the child is experiencing within both her internal and external worlds” (p. 73). There is much taking place within the external and internal worlds of us all, and when adults are attuned to our own experiences, we are able to more fully be present and attuned to the children in our midst and to support them in being self-attuned as well.

*Researcher Reflection: September 2020*

*Childhood in the time of COVID-19. My son, recently turned two, plays creatively with the plastic window locks jutting out from the windowsill, pushing them down like a bottle of hand sanitizer and making the sounds of water splashing out of a tap. Meanwhile, he shouts, “wash your hands!” as he vigorously scrubs them together. His favourite activity at daycare is to spray toys and surfaces with a handheld water sprayer, copying what he sees his educators do regularly with the bottles of disinfectant. My daughter, almost four, plays imaginatively with her dolls, matter-of-factly saying, “now it’s time to take your temperature,” mimicking the adults in her world doing the same to her every day. When I tell her that we are going to visit her aunty for a BBQ, her first question is, “Can we go inside her house or do we have to stay outside?” She is disappointed as I remind her, “Outside only, baby.” For the next while, anyhow.*

*As I finalize this dissertation in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, I cannot help but contemplate the effects that physical distancing, social isolation, increased family time, and potentially compromised health will have on the overall wellness of young people. Seemingly every week there are updated guidelines from the Ministry of Education, from my school district, from all educational jurisdictions around the world, as the reality of the situation keeps changing. Understandably, everyone is (hopefully) trying to do what is best for children of all ages, and their families. There are still so many unknowns. What will teaching and learning look like in the midst of this ongoing global pandemic? More to the point, how might we each be Really Real as we move through this together? As Seidel (2014a) writes, a curriculum for miracles “takes up life itself as its topic” (p. 11). These are some of the big topics of our time: COVID-19, wellness, connectedness... Life is not always joyful. Many people experience mental health problems and illness, both which can be exacerbated by the distancing and isolation at play throughout COVID-19. How might we come together to discuss these topics of life itself? This is what education is all about.*

*Earlier this month, my own imagination carried me away in my dreams, showing an alien-like scene with all teachers and students interacting from afar while wearing masks, and some in faceshields, gloves, and full hazmat suits. It brought me to pause—to wonder, what is our pedagogical responsibility to children in these trying times? If our vocation is to lead them, to go through life together, then this is calling us to recognize that “children’s lives matter now” (Seidel, 2014a, p. 10) and that what concerns them now are “time-bound questions” (Seidel, 2014c, p. 120). How can we as educators show up for students by being “really Real” in life, attuning to our own inner selves in order to help them do the same, and slowing things down so that they are better able to “‘re-embodiment’ the body in the learning environment” (Shajahan, 2015, p. 495), however that looks.*

*The study described in this dissertation would have played out very differently if undertaken during the physical distancing restrictions of COVID-19. While I recognize that it is hard to work toward a more embodied, connected way of being in the world when people of all ages are encouraged to “stay away” from one another, this is a time when attuning to all aspects of self as a four-part person may serve us well. By paying attention not only to our physical health and mental states, but also to how the emotional and spiritual parts of ourselves are affected, we may have a way to begin making sense of the many unknowns that lie ahead. How might we face these*

*uncertainties in a way that strengthens, rather than destroys, our relationships with ourselves and with others?*

### ***Being “Really Real”***

Actively being in the world of late requires maintaining an inward attunement so that I can outwardly respond to my children, to my students, to every situation in a “really Real” manner. The etymology of the word “real” (OED, n.d.) demonstrates a connection with “genuine” from as early as the 1550s. “Genuine,” in turn, is connected to the word “whole,” which is also defined as healthy, sound, entire, and genuine (OED, n.d.). The connection between being real and being whole is essential to the discussion of what it is that offers us a sense of wellness, and is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

### *“Really Real” and the Field of Curriculum Studies*

Being “really Real” is a way to link inner wisdom, or attunement, with outer actions. It starts internally and flows to the external. Rendón (2009), in her discussion of *sentipensante* pedagogy (p. 131)—a way of being that links sensing and feeling (from the Spanish verb *sentir*) with thinking (from the Spanish verb *pensar*)—focuses on the harmony and dissonance between the inner and outer realms. I appreciate Rendón's emphasis “on the delicate balance between our inner life of intuition, emotion, and sense of meaning and purpose, and the outer world of action and service” (p. 4), which is enacted and embodied through being “really Real.”

Davis et al. (2020) articulate how Indigenous pedagogy outlines that “the experience of *how* something is learned to a large degree constitutes *what* is learned” (p. 123, emphasis in original). This understanding was attended to throughout each aspect of the study—the *how* we learned guided the *what* we learned. In life, *how* we live points to *what* matters to us. Seidel (2014a) writes that

A Curriculum for Miracles is a curriculum of the middle. Unfolding in the midst of things. In the midst of life and death. In the midst of joy and sorrow. In the midst of creation and destruction. It expands, always big enough, to hold the breath of wonder and the breath of anguish. (p. 10)

Such a curriculum honours being “really Real.” Veronica demonstrated the experience of living in the midst of joy and sorrow when sharing about her dog:

*You know how I like – my dog died.  
I asked him to make me a promise  
that he wouldn't die until my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday  
just because he was getting really sick.  
So it turned out he died the day before my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
I'm always going to remember that though probably  
because he was my first dog.  
He dug and  
he would sit there  
in the shade  
between the two cars.  
So I went there one day and started crying.  
I usually went to go see him out there and  
sit by him and  
pet him.*

...

*It's really hard because I'm really lonely then.  
Sometimes I want to pretend  
that it didn't happen  
and I want live on with it,  
but I can't somehow.  
But the worst thing is that I don't really –  
I don't know how to say this, but  
I'm very lonely*

\* \* \*

*Yeah. I look up [toward the dog who passed away] –  
when I'm alone.  
Well, I don't really look up,  
I talk to him.  
I had a stuffy ever since I was three years old.  
He looked exactly like him.  
So I'll sit there and talk to him.*



*We have pictures of him.  
I have a picture frame of him with me and my sister  
so I talk to that too or I'll look up.*

*Or he comes through dreams.  
Once he did.  
But I haven't seen him since.  
It was like two weeks after he died.  
I was just walking to my grandma's house  
because we live on the same property  
and I saw his face and everything  
so I ran up to him and started petting him  
and then I closed my eyes for a while  
because I was hugging him  
and then it turned out to be my other dog, Echo,  
so I think it was trying to mean "be there for him."  
Yeah, so I guess it's kind of like –  
I didn't know what the meaning was.  
It might be like, "be good with Echo."  
Like don't be upset all the time  
and not pet him  
or play with him  
or anything.  
Be there with him all the time  
and I kind of thought that.*

Veronica's words show the nuances of her processing how to be with both the breath of wonder and the breath of anguish (Seidel, 2014a). Veronica offered a glimpse of what being "really Real" looks like on the ground level—she was able to *be* in the midst of things, in the middle of the fray.

Turning inward is not always easy, especially for those with trauma, insecure attachment to a trusted adult, or those lacking a sense of self or working to give up perfectionist tendencies. In short, turning inward is difficult for many children and adults. By undertaking self-study alongside this research study, I have experienced firsthand what people go through when paying attention to self and one's inner life. It was fascinating to observe the research participants turn inward through many of the curated activities. Indeed, throughout our time together they became increasingly adept at manoeuvring within and between realms both internal and external in a

healthy and fluid manner. An example of this comes from Claudia’s writing about a piece of nature art she created after a guided visualization activity. Hers was the picture of a duck floating on water (shared in Chapter Six) and she easily linked the experience of the visualization with a memory of being outdoors and with the feeling that accompanied her while she was drawing and colouring the picture. Although we did not talk about it in depth, Claudia was very engaged and connected to her inner knowing in all parts of this work:

*It’s like warm  
A little windy  
You could hear the birds sing to you  
You could hear the waves a little  
It is a really good feeling  
When the birds sing to me it’s like I want to sing.  
I want that feeling to come back.*

This research has prompted me to ask: what might happen if children lived daily with an awareness of their inherent worth as unique beings? What would it look like in schools, if adults modelled for children ways to connect with their inner wisdom? If children were encouraged to explore their emotional and spiritual selves so as to discover the wide array of possibilities within—not only responses and actions deemed socially acceptable and “good,” but the more complex sides, too, as a way of integrating and learning how they are made up a whole range of feelings, experiences, and inner knowings? Veronica summed this up in one line:

*I guess I got to know myself more.*

By getting to know ourselves, we may be able to heal the disconnect of relationship denial (first with self and then with others) that colonial legacies have wrought on our culture. This is an ongoing process that takes time, beginning with awareness as expressed by Veronica here.

### *Linking the Micro and the Macro*

The particularity of Veronica's experience, as well as the voices of many participants highlighted earlier, speak to the main focus of this dissertation. Jardine (2012a) writes how "a pedagogy left in peace is not pointing to some large and grand insight, but to something local, immediate work that needs to be done" (p. 220). The local and immediate work to be done with the students in my research project was to be fully present and attuned to them, week upon week, month upon month. In the instance of the words shared by the participants, Jardine (2012a) outlines the important "work of tracing out how the particular case can have something vital to say about what we have heretofore understood those laws, methods, and principles to be" (p. 220). The laws, methods, and principles to which this research responds are the misguided perspectives that schools (and the world) are led primarily by the outer realm rooted in Market Logic, a skewed sense of time, and a shaky foundation that is not set upon notions of human being-ness that honour the four-part person. Using the words of the participants as the particular case in order to make connections with the main concerns emphasized in this research, this work speaks to these large issues facing the field of curriculum and pedagogy today.

Van Manen (1997) articulates that when researchers are unsure of what to do next, it is important to realize "that the research process itself is practically inseparable from the writing process" and to "keep the evolving part-whole relation of one's study in mind" (p. 167). This is a helpful reminder, as I work out in writing how the particulars of my study come to bear on the essence of this work.

### **Amplification: What It Means to Be Real**

For the remainder of this chapter, I draw upon the wisdom offered in the classic children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922/2011), to amplify the meaning of *real*, as in when indicating

that the research project gave the students the opportunity to be “really Real.” Amplification is defined as “the particulars by which a statement is expanded” (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

Etymologically, it stems from the 1540s Latin term *amplificationem*, meaning “a widening, extending” or “enlargement.” Expanding, extending, and enlarging one’s understanding of what it means to be real, to be whole, to be well, is a key aim of this research. Amplification, as used in depth psychology, allows the researcher to zoom in on a particular idea or term while at the same time opening it up to possibilities and making it larger. Fidyk (2014, Jungian Psychology course outline) explains that

Amplification is a *method of association* whereby one starts with an issue/dream/image/symbol/symptom and *through comparative study*—often mythology, religion, fairy tales, legends across cultures and historical periods—it becomes fleshed out by revisiting it through x, then y, then z, creating a circuitous layering of understanding and interpretation. (p. 4)

The issue here is being “really Real” and the legend to flesh it out is *The Velveteen Rabbit*. This connects once again to theoretical physicist David Bohm’s explanation of implicate and explicate orders, in which zooming in microscopically on something of interest ends up appearing much the same as expanding out exponentially into the universe (see Bohm & Peat, 1987; and Peat, 1997).

I wish to shed light on what the experience of being real or experiencing wholeness fully entails in order to more fully develop the theory that has emerged from this research. Wallace (2001) outlines:

Comparisons to myth or fairy tale or any other age-old manifestation that originated from the depth of the psyche are called “*amplifications*.” They help us to understand the

symbolic meaning of a present-day image that comes from the same depth. A true “*symbol*” creates a connection between conscious and unconscious. Its form expresses something that cannot be said more clearly, because it is not yet clearly understood. (p. 100)

By amplifying a term or image, it becomes possible to understand that term or image symbolically, which moves beyond the literal to a place where enhanced meaning may be found.

Amplification is not merely a comparison, analogy, or interpretation, but when used methodologically, as done here, it includes aspects of each combined with a felt sense, a resonance. This resonance is discussed in different ways by different scholars. Fidyk (2017) calls it “an inherent sense of interrelatedness” (p. 57). Seidel (2014a) refers to it as an acknowledgement of the “infinite interconnected miracles of life on this planet” (p. 12). Jardine (2012b) outlines how “this ongoing decoding and the stumbles and recoveries it requires, is the work itself” (p. 8). The work that comprised my research in effect stumbled upon the interconnected aspects of what it is that makes life and living worthwhile for those who are living in a way that is “really Real.”

The entirety of Veronica’s words demonstrate that she was on a journey of becoming “really Real” as a four-part person. In no way did she have her life figured out, but she was not turning away from the quest. By continuing to amplify her particular experiences in the upcoming sections, I circumambulate around the main concern of the disconnect experienced through relationship denial. I do the same with the four main sub-problems articulated throughout this work: lack of regard paid to the inner life, misguided neoliberal values, a faulty school structure, and a skewed sense of time.

In *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Skin Horse explains to the Velveteen Rabbit that being real comes from being loved. He says, “Real isn’t how you are made... It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real” (Williams, 1922/2011, p. 12). In this study, I equate this sort of Real (with a capital “R”) with the connection that comes from exploring the conscious resonance between the self you present to the world (“false self”/persona) and the self you experience when authentically alone, or your core. This core is described in various ways in different traditions. Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr (2003) coins this authenticity as “true self,” and I follow Brown’s view of authenticity as “*the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are*” (2010, p. 50, emphasis in original). Jungian psychologist James Hollis (2013) reminds us that “when we remember that the Greek word psyche means ‘soul,’ we have then entered the interiority of our lives” (p. 20). Being Real equates to coming face to face with this interiority. Through the encounters made available during this research, the participants were able to embrace who they were at their core, as well as learned how to turn inward in order to be able to respond outwardly in an authentic manner.

By creating a space and time for the participants to be “really Real,” they were able to connect with various aspects of their psyches, not only those that were joyful and light-hearted, but also the fearful, anxious, and heavier parts. Authentic expression required a full spectrum of emotion and experience—from Bruce, who rarely followed guidelines and usually spent the afternoon in our shared space doing as he wished, to Bobby, who could often think of little more than his video games, to Chloe and Claudia, sisters who were seeking authentic relationships and love. Each of the participants carried the experiences of their lives into the research space, while

at the same time engaging with activities explicitly planned as a way to draw them inward and slow down the externally-imposed notions of time that they were used to.

If even for a brief moment, participants were able to experience the sensation of being “really Real” as they connected with that which made them whole. Becoming “really Real” requires an active inner life: it cannot happen all at once but takes time, willingness, and a curiosity for what lies beyond that which meets the eye. Through this research I have experienced glimpses of this and the data shows that many of my participants began to do so as well (see Chapter Six for examples).

As evident through his engaged participation in the yoga and art activities, Henrick was able to express himself in ways beyond his external tough guy persona when provided with the fertile ground to do so. April allowed her voice to be heard, albeit quietly, by expressing her questions about life and her concerns about friendships and growing up. Steve outwardly shared what was going on inwardly through his artwork, using this outlet as a way to convey his uniqueness as a four-part person. While everyone experienced being “really Real” in their own way, it was clear through their side comments to both me and their peers that the time spent on the research project assisted in them to authentically take up this work.

Through the time working with Veronica in particular, she embodied wholeness by paying attention to connections between her inner and outer life as well as by being willing to sit with her feelings, difficult as they were. Veronica’s words spoke to the stories that she told about who she was and what mattered to her. Indeed, curriculum as a whole can be considered as the stories that humans tell about the world and their place in it (D. Donald, personal communication, 2020). My time speaking with and listening to Veronica was an opportunity to support her in

initiating a different kind of story within herself as a way to guide her as she figured out how to live well.

### ***Connecting with a Sense of Time and Place***

Veronica's story, particularly early on in our visits together, highlighted her frustration with the busy pace of life in which her family was caught up:

*So,  
My parents are usually busy with the chores they have to do.  
I cry a lot  
because I don't know what to do  
without my dog  
or any of my friends there.  
I don't know what to do at all.  
My dad says, "You're all right, Ronnie,  
but I can't do really anything at the moment for you right now."  
Like, you know, because we're always so busy.  
Like he wants to help me, but what I can do, right?*

...  
*Yeah.  
He wants to be there for me,  
but can't do it at the moment because he has to go to work all the time  
and all that.*

Veronica was living in a new location, struggling with feelings of abandonment on many levels, and wanted to do the self-attuned work required to be "really Real" in her life, exactly as it was: rushed pace, unknown place, and all. She shared stories about letting herself sink into a more embodied experience of time:

*So it turned out he died the day before my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
I'm always going to remember that though probably  
because he was my first dog.  
He dug and  
he would sit there  
in the shade  
between the two cars.  
So I went there one day and started crying.  
I usually went to go see him out there and  
sit by him and*



*pet him.  
He kind of had like a nose like a bear  
which was cute.  
When he was little,  
all he had was sisters.  
They would always bite his ears  
and everything  
and so they put him in a different kennel  
and he was always lonely too.  
It's really hard because I'm really lonely then.  
Sometimes I want to pretend  
that it didn't happen  
and I want live on with it,  
but I can't somehow.*

It was not easy for Veronica to sit in the shade between the two cars as she remembered her beloved pet. Yet she seemed to recognize the healing power of this slowed-down pace as a way to pause and re-connect. In this vein, Brown (2010) explains that

If we stop long enough to create a quiet emotional clearing, the truth of our lives will invariably catch up with us. We convince ourselves that if we stay busy enough and keep moving, reality won't be able to keep up. So we stay in front of the truth about how tired and scared and confused and overwhelmed we sometimes feel. (p. 108)

Since so many of us, adults and children alike, fear the truth of our lives, this angst propels us to keep perpetually busy so that we will not have to face that which is going on within. And yet, this inner reality need not be scary. Along with the children in the study, I worked to create “a quiet emotional clearing” that provided the opportunity for all of us to check in with ourselves. One sub-goal of the project was to build capacity for students to be able to function well even in the midst of uncertainty. This lack of the certain, this “not knowing” is another way of speaking, of living in the tension, of holding space for possibility. As educators, so often the pressure to *need to know* rules us, unfortunately allowing the outer world and its norms to take over from the intuitive voice of the inner realm and, in effect, passing this *modus operandi* on to children. This

project sought a measure of comfortability in holding space for possibility, as this is where creative work can take place. Over time, while Veronica still had many outer struggles in her life, she was able to connect inwardly with herself to the point that she was able to take ownership of what being “really Real” might look like for her:

*I guess I got to know myself more.  
Like, “Oh, I should do this.”  
Because this summer I’m thinking I’m going to write a story.  
I like writing because it’s like you can do imagination.  
You can do anything.  
If people want to do how their life was,  
but different names and everything, they can.  
So that’s what I want to do.*

Veronica was finding ways to slow her busy thoughts and the incessant rush of the world. Processing the pain of losing her dog and her plan to write a story were her ways of connecting with an embodied way of being linked to the sacred time of healing. As Veronica embodied, I too try to embrace the world as a mystery, recognizing that this unknown need not be feared but rather embraced as providing bigger meaning in our lives. Building upon this understanding, the focus expands from worrying about how to best put these transformative practices into effect to asking ever-wider questions of what the implications of a broader perspective of life and education might entail. As Hollis (2013) queries, “how are we to reframe our understanding of ourselves in this palpable world if such confounding mysteries exist?” (p. 19). Veronica offers one possible response: perhaps we simply need to get to know ourselves more. This is not prescriptive, not descriptive of how one might go about this endeavour, and certainly not an easily marketable approach. Rather, it is a starting point for further contemplation, a beginning of that which marks a life of being open to the transformation inherent in life and living, if only we are willing to go through all its messes and difficulties. Hollis (2013) reminds us that “‘going through’ means that we have to experience what we do not wish to experience, for to flee it is

even worse” (p. 131). As Veronica’s life illustrates, experiencing the fullness of life requires this “going through.” Her inward and outward transformation was rooted in the way she approached getting to know herself: not by fleeing her difficult experiences but by remaining fully present to them.

### ***Questioning Neoliberal Values***

Many of the participants experienced the disconnect from self and others initiated by colonialism’s legacy of relationship denial and perpetuated by misguided ideas of what would bring wholeness, such as Market Logic. Time and again, the data revealed the importance of relationships and connection in the students’ lives. When they saw themselves as individuals with something to contribute to the world just as they were and in that particular moment, they felt that they mattered and were cared about. The participants noticed this sense that they mattered through various connections—with me, with one another, with themselves, and with larger issues at play in the world. *The Velveteen Rabbit* story (1922/2011) speaks further about caring and being cared for:

And so time went on, and the little Rabbit was very happy—so happy that he never noticed how his beautiful velveteen fur was getting shabbier and shabbier, and his tail had come unsewn, and all the pink had rubbed off his nose where the Boy had kissed him. (p. 19)

In the context of the research, this passage relates to the students from the study becoming comfortable in their own skin. Veronica was becoming more and more comfortable in her own skin throughout the project, as evidenced in her growing clarity and confidence:

*Life is always going to be complicated  
whether you’re always happy  
or not.*

*It's going to be complicated.*

These words, spoken by a ten-year-old, bring me to reflect upon my own life. When I was her age, I did not recognize the inherent complications involved in living life. I presumed the purpose was to find joy (by following the JOY acronym I had learned at church of Jesus first, Others next, You last) and to work hard, and if these things panned out, life would be straightforward and easy. As my own life attests, things are not quite so simple and Veronica's words hold true: "Life is always going to be complicated." The wisdom here is that consciousness, the seeking of deep awareness of life, requires a tolerance for and acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity. This is what living authentically is all about, and what is not fostered in the lives of many children growing up. As Brown (2010) writes, "authenticity is not something we have or don't have. It's a practice—a conscious choice of how we want to live" (Brown, 2010, p. 49). Practicing authentic living is ongoing and begins with a recognition that the goal is not to be joyful, it is to be whole. This practice is not—cannot be—rooted in the values of the market.

Veronica's musings demonstrate a strong connection to her dreams and imagination. This emphasis on what matters in her world is distinctly different from the ways promoted by neoliberal thinking. Here is an excerpt that highlights this:

*Or he comes through dreams.*

...

*It was like two weeks after he died.  
I was just walking to my grandma's house  
because we live on the same property  
and I saw his face and everything  
so I ran up to him and started petting him  
and then I closed my eyes for a while  
because I was hugging him  
and then it turned out to be my other dog, Echo,  
so I think it was trying to mean "be there for him."  
Yeah, so I guess it's kind of like –*

...

*Be there with him all the time  
and I kind of thought that.*

By being able to prioritize her own personal needs for fulfillment, Veronica connected with what mattered to her, and thus experienced the realm of the sacred as a guiding factor in her life.

Later in the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* the nursery magic Fairy appears to save the little Rabbit when he had been tossed into the garbage along with all the other toys that were contaminated from the Boy's illness.

“Wasn't I Real before?” asked the little Rabbit. “You were Real to the Boy,” the Fairy said, “because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to everyone.” And she held the little Rabbit close in her arms and flew with him into the wood. (Williams, 1922/2011, p. 39)

Being Real to everyone happens when a genuine transformation takes place within an individual as they learn some of what it is that makes them well and whole. Veronica experienced some of this transformation when she was able to embody the full spectrum of her existence as a four-part person. This happens when personal experiences of wellness and sense of self take root to the extent that this attunement that begins at the core of one's being can then reach outward toward others in a “really Real” way. Not everyone reaches this point and certainly not in the same timeframe. One of the reasons why I highlight Veronica's transformation in particular is that she experienced it in a more significant manner than many of the other participants over our time together. Everyone's experience in the research study was unique, and while they all learned how to pay attention to that which made them feel well, some were more ready than others to let these experiences authentically impact their lives.

### *Interrupting the Faulty School Structure*

Transformation is a genuine, noticeable shift in the way a person carries themselves, the way they interact with the world, the way they treat themselves inside. As evident in his emphatic comments to his nanny, the little boy in the story allows the bunny to start the journey to being “really Real,” a journey which only later the bunny embodies himself.

“Give me my Bunny!” [the Boy] said. “You musn’t say that. He isn’t a toy. He’s REAL!”

When the little Rabbit heard that, he was happy, for he knew that what the Skin Horse had said was true at last. The nursery magic had happened to him, and he was a toy no longer.

He was Real. The Boy himself had said it. (p. 21)

At times the magic of being real starts as being recognized by those around you, as being unique and seen as your own special human being with something to offer the world. Gradually, however, if being Real is going to be a way of living that sticks with you, it turns into you recognizing and living out of your own inherent worth. The take-away here is twofold: being loved by others and also loving ourselves. So often in educational realms both teachers and students get stuck in the motions of acting out roles without paying attention to who they really are, perhaps because they are so mired in a system in which they feel stuck. This dynamic is at play beyond the classroom as well, where people are unclear of what it is that truly makes them whole. Here, for me as the researcher, and for many educators, the role can be to offer students a starting point, a safe place, for being recognized in their full individuality. For the participants in this study to feel Real, to feel whole, they had to have faith in themselves and to be in tune with what their needs were. For me, for these children, for anyone to experience what it feels like to be “really Real,” it starts by paying attention to the inner voice that guides us.

Veronica struggled immensely with what it felt like to be herself, to be valued just as she was, and to not simply pass by unnoticed. Regularly she shared words that echoed these:

*I'm here alone, you know.  
I feel like I'm alone.  
and don't have any friends at the moment.  
I do have friends, but –  
I don't have any, really.  
I don't have much friends.  
I don't have a lot of friends.  
I only have like three friends  
and that's not good.*

In her world, in her grade 4 experience, she felt alone. While she may have had a handful of friends, she had internalized the message that this did not measure up. Part of the goal of this study was to interrupt this false narrative and re-orient her toward knowing (from the inside out) what it is that might allow her to be “really Real.”

This felt sense, this inner attunement, if genuine, does not falsely lead one to decisions that are oriented on the expectations of others. Living in such a way, in resonance with our own personal truth, is not easy. Sadly, educational institutions built upon the colonial logic of disconnection and relationship denial do not often have room for living in a resonant, attuned manner. I suggest that this is why so many people, educators and children alike, operate out of a sense of false self. Rohr (2003) outlines false self as being a sense of self predicated upon mass consciousness, rooted in fear, and pre-occupied with form rather than substance. He states that we “need both, true self and false self. It’s a dance. We just have an excess of false self because it’s the only game in town for us” (47:35). While many of us seek balance dynamically, we recognize that it remains elusive and is continuously in flux. Meanwhile, often we are unaware of the power of the false self, as it tends to dwell in the realm of our unconscious, to borrow a term from Jungian psychology. If the role of the false self is not brought into consciousness, or awareness,

its importance in pointing out the ways in which we each may be unbalanced will go unrecognized. It is vital to recognize that for others, false self may in fact be conscious and a way that people armour themselves from difficulty in life. A person on the journey of becoming recognizes the place for this false self to operate and is able to grow into themselves as a four-part person who is living out of their true self, or from a place of wholeness that is attuned to inner wisdom. How might it become possible to connect with that which gives us life, with that which makes us Real? How might educators attune to the needs of the young in our midst so that they do not lose the sense of wholeness that they are born with? How might we learn from them what it means to live a life of wellness, of being enough? Already at age ten, Veronica was noticing how many older people have been schooled out of attunement with themselves:

*Once you get older  
you don't really show yourself  
as much as you did  
when you were little.*

When Veronica was most embodied, she was able to contemplate life with incredible wisdom. She seemed to recognize how adults are often less tuned in to their authentic inner experiences than children. This brings up many questions: How might educators live in such a way that attunement is embodied and being “really Real” is present in our every interaction with students, with families, with friends? And how might adults in our educational institutions model for students what connection looks like, so that students can foster healthy inner and outer relationships as a four-part person? With the students, this project became an opportunity to pay attention to the nuances at play in each of our lives.



## *Valuing the Inner Life*

How might educators foster the connection with an active inner life in our own lives and in those of our children, our students? Hollis (2013) shares from his own experience:

It was not that I had to consult an outside authority, which is what we learn to do in childhood; it was rather that I had to learn to consult the authority within; wherein I recognized what I wished, needed, had to do. (p. 22)

This approach to life and living is completely foreign to most educational institutions in capitalist societies, where children are taught content-focused outcomes and socialization goals, while rarely (if ever) being encouraged to check in with their inner authority.

While I recognize the need for socialization, the goal of consulting an inner authority is to reach a point of intrinsic inspiration rather than extrinsic motivation. Further, by finding connections to that which makes one well, the hope is that the inner guide will not lead one astray. By accessing this interiority with the children in the study in a tangible way that first centered on lived experience (through movement, art, and creative writing), the wisdom of their inner worlds came alive. Thus, every week we re-visited each aspect comprising a four-part person: by connecting in physical form, we were able to experience life together from an emotional and spiritual stand-point, and then to make sense of this using our mental faculties. This was our way of accessing how to be “really Real.”

It was profound to witness students’ lived embodiment of the process, recognizing in effect that we could “trust the body to enlighten the soul” (Taylor, 2009, p. xviii). Taylor’s (2009) text, which I read throughout my research at Mirror Lake School, is titled *An Altar in the World*. She explains the meaning of this title in the introduction, which attests to how the research space with the young in this study evolved: “altars in this world [are] ordinary-looking places where

human beings have met and may continue to meet up with the divine More that they sometimes call God” (Taylor, 2009, p. xix). While we called it energy or creativity in our time together, it was clear through the looks on the children’s faces and the focused attention put forth by each that they were experiencing “the divine More” in their own way. The otherwise ordinary-looking classroom with desks pushed aside and open space laid out to make way for imagination was an altar in its own right.

Throughout our time together, Veronica was learning how to be “really Real”—how to connect with her inner life as a guide. Many of her particular experiences speak to the more general concerns articulated in this work, and some have been purposefully shared more than once as per the value of circumambulating the essence of the issues.

*I'm the only one  
that's really me  
that could bond with me.  
Just me,  
myself,  
and I.*

This profound declaration speaks to Veronica’s process of befriending herself through acknowledging her inner voice. Over time, she was teaching herself to meet her own needs, how to be the friend she does not have, how to genuinely care. Veronica was real with herself and did not pretend that all was well, but rather faced her feelings of abandonment by sitting with them. In time, she experienced “the freedom that comes when we stop pretending that everything is okay when it isn’t” (Brown, 2010, p. 126). This freedom was still accompanied by tears, by loneliness, by fear of the unknown. And yet she experienced it as freedom nonetheless, alongside struggle, because Veronica was unwilling to pretend that everything was okay.

Throughout her months of processing and sharing, Veronica began to realize that by paying attention to her inner life, she felt greater connection inside, as well as enhanced

wholeness. It became evident that the way for her to proceed in her life was not to “solve” her problems, but to live with them, to sit next to them for an extended period of time, and to not run away from reality. This was her way of growing into herself and thus outgrowing her wounds. Hollis (2013) explains that “as Jung once observed, we don’t solve our wounds, but we can outgrow them. The flight from doing so is the real betrayal” (p. 102). Too often people betray themselves and their journey by fleeing from or ignoring their difficulties in life. This does no one any favours. Veronica’s transformation attests to the importance of not seeking a quick fix but rather being willing to pay focused attention to that which is causing pain and to turn toward it rather than away from it. How might educators foster this ability in all students?

### **Wholeness: Seeking and Creating Meaning in Life**

Wholeness acknowledges and requires the integration of a full spectrum of emotion and experience: pain and suffering alongside well-being and joy. Hollis’s (2013) perspective, rooted in depth psychology, outlines clearly that without suffering, “there is no call to consciousness, no showing up for the appointment we have with life. We all keep slip-sliding away until something catches us and holds us to accountability” (p. 65). The students in the study were invited to “show up to life,” not just in terms of their physical presence in the room, but in terms of facing the experiences that comprised their lives on a daily basis.

One of my concerns is that if educators have an unbalanced understanding of the role of that which is painful, difficult, or daunting in the lives of students, we do not give children the opportunity to process how to truly make meaning in their lives. As Brown (2010) writes, “if we really want to live a joyful, connected, and meaningful life, we *must* talk about things that get in the way” (p. 35). I propose that we start by talking about trauma and mental health struggles in school settings. Progress can only be made by sitting with, mulling over, embodying, and

interacting with the aspects of students' lives that "get in the way" of learning. In order to do so, it becomes important to look beyond that which meets the eye. Through slowing down the harried pace of life, educators can begin to model for students first what attunement might look like, and next how to take this into daily life in a "really Real" way.

Veronica, like all the participants, had many things going on in her life that affected the meanings she made and impacted her experiences of wholeness. Being fully human, being whole, demands a willingness to acknowledge discomfort, suffering, and the existence of a life that dynamically connects body with soul, the visible with the invisible. Living in mystery, in the realm of an animated worldview that is alive with unconscious power and wisdom that comes from a connection with the inner life, allows for meaning to emerge. Living as a four-part person invites a dynamic balancing of this mysterious, active world that is experienced internally and externally at once. By being open to a full spectrum of emotion as a necessary part of experiencing wholeness, a feeling of being "really Real" may be possible.

The children in this study taught me many things, and made me keenly aware of the connections between theory and practice. Our interactions together were fluid and dynamic, even while loosely structured around the questions and concerns I had about the lack of attention given to the mental health needs of students in schools. They taught me much about what being "really Real" in an embodied way might be.

A significant contribution of Carl Jung's work surrounds the psychological influence that the unlived life of a parent has on a child. The unlived life of a parent, a caregiver, a teacher, a leader in the lives of children, can wreak havoc on the very existence of those children. By "unlived life," what is meant is people not being true to themselves, not aligning their life and choices with the guidance found when attuned to their inner wisdom. A society unconscious of its

own unjust tenets for life and living leads the people in that society to perpetuate injustices and pass down their misaligned views to the next generations. Individually and collectively, it is time to wake up to what life is beckoning us to become. Perhaps when we as adults are conscious of our own shortcomings, hang-ups, and particular ways of viewing the world, we are better able to support children in gaining a wider and deeper understanding of themselves and their role in life. Specifically as educators, if we are not outwardly living in a way that is in touch with our inner wisdom, we are modelling for children what it looks like to live in a manner that is out of sync with ourselves.

This is why this dissertation is geared towards adults working with children, as it is the “pedagogical implications of children’s expressions of wholeness and well-being” that concern this work. As has become clear through the research process, there is no one-size-fits-all unit or lesson plan. Rather, we would each be wise to remain attuned to ourselves and thus not overly burden the young in our midst, to ensure that we are giving children the time and space that they need to explore life in their own way. This is how we can love them: by providing both support and challenge (A. Fidyk, personal communication, May 2014). Support them in big ways when that is what they need, and genuinely challenge them when that is what is called for.

Mental health and overall wellness are often directly linked, as indicated in the 2002-administered Canadian Community Health Survey – Mental Health and Well-being. This survey categorizes well-being in ten main indicator groups which include work, learning, financial security, family life, housing, social participation, leisure, health, security, and the environment (*Indicators of Well-Being in Canada*, n.d.). From a curriculum and pedagogy standpoint, many of these indicators are evident in the lives of students in school settings. Learning, social participation, leisure, health, and security all have direct connections to students’ school

experience, highlighting the need for educators to attend to these multi-faceted aspects of well-being. While this website and research was recently decommissioned, the main indicator groups continue to hold relevance. These indicators also point to the important role of milieu in considering the educational experiences of our young. These practical commonplaces are our way to step into the fray of the world, and particularly into schools, in order to nurture this proposed curriculum of attunement.

Wholeness, being “really Real,” is connected to something beyond our outer ego selves, tapping into the inner realm of the sacred and embodied wisdom. Whether we label this “something” within and beyond ourselves as God/Yahweh/Allah (Christianity/Judaism/Islam), Creator (many Indigenous cultures), Buddha-nature (Buddhism), capital-S Self (Jungian psychology), energetic source (Vedic yoga philosophy), or the creative principle (my current personal favourite) (Fidyk, 2017), the realization that we do not have everything figured out allows us to start experiencing wholeness. Hollis (2013) shares how “over the entrance to his home, Jung carved a phrase from Erasmus: ‘Bidden or unbidden, God will be there.’” (p. 13). This phrase attests to the presence of a power within and beyond ourselves at play in our lives, no matter the name by which we call it. How might the sacred show up in the lives of our students? And how might educators be attuned and open to ways for it to appropriately emerge in school settings?

### **Embodied Wisdom**

My research with children has also revealed the importance of acknowledging the wisdom offered through attunement and by being “really Real.” This can begin by turning in to the inner life, by slowing down, by not letting capitalist goals guide the educational endeavour, and by questioning the underlying foundations of our current school structures. One implication of this is

that nothing can be taken for granted or at face value. What will it take for us to show up, to wake up to the false claims of wholeness and the ongoing disconnection of relationship denial perpetuated by colonial logics? An opportunity for genuine wellness emerges through piecing together the three core concepts that emerged during this research: acknowledging that healing and growth happen in the realm of sacred time, understanding that true strength first comes from turning inward (attunement), and recognizing the need for authentic external expression and connection (being “really Real”). This chance to settle into our own skin—for me to truly be *me* and for you to truly be *you*—is a way to begin fully living in an embodied way.

As Veronica’s experiences emphasize, what life looks like for each of us is incredibly diverse. A basic message that I sought to foster in the children in the study was that “you constitute a blessing simply by showing up” (Taylor, 2009, p. 199). By interacting with each student in such a way that they could feel as though they mattered, it became possible to slow down the busy pace of life, to truly dwell in the place we were sharing. By simply *being* together, by re-imagining how we might interact at school by checking in with our inner selves throughout the study, we were able to find a measure of embodied wholeness.

Prior to conducting the study, I did not expect to come to the recognition of this work as sacred. In hindsight, I now recognize that healing is sacred work. As I continued to analyze and re-read the data, while also writing throughout the process, the work changed and grew in such a way that the realm of the sacred is now a foundational piece of how the research links together and holds weight. By investing themselves in the value of our work together, many of the students began to recognize the presence of an inner life, manifest through attunement and by being “really Real.” While we did not discuss the terms “sacred” or “wholeness” explicitly, the

children each experienced life as a four-part person by interacting with the materials, each other, and their own experiences and memories every week.

Hollis (2013) reminds us that no matter how much we attend to the wisdom of an inner life, a good deal will always remain a mystery. He states that “the human psyche is so vast, and the ego frame so small, that we can never know ourselves fully” (p. 84). Rather than feel defeated or overwhelmed by this, it reminds us to keep perspective and offers a way of relieving the pressure we place on ourselves. In life, it is not our job to “figure things out” intellectually or to have all the answers. Instead, how might we turn inward, pause, and pay attention to that which our inner guide might have to offer? To me, the ongoing mystery is a call to simply show up for my own life, and thus hopefully encourage others to do the same. Showing up, Hollis (2013) explains, is a way “to step into the largeness of the soul” (p. 140). As educators, encouraging children to step into the largeness of their souls is a compelling reason to get up in the morning. By bringing awareness to the existence of an inner life through attunement, by being “really Real,” and by slowing down our harried pace, we are each in our own way “showing up” to and for our lives.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPLICATIONS

My doctoral studies have spanned the better part of a decade. Since I began this endeavour in 2011, there have been significant shifts in the realms of mental health, politics, economics, spirituality/religion, and more. When I began, the topic of mental health was largely overlooked in educational institutions. My research started out on the cutting edge of exploring how pedagogues might attend to the mental health and wellness of students. Now, most educators would wholeheartedly agree that the focus on mental health is integrated into their daily interactions with children and youth. This development encourages me, and even while educators are already alerted to the necessity of caring for children holistically, many are still unsure of ways to best do so.

Moreover, since I moved to Edmonton, Alberta, in 2011, there have been multiple political shifts—each of which has affected the provincial government’s educational focus. The New Democratic Party (NDP) defeated the Conservative government in the spring 2015 provincial election, and undertook a full curriculum review process to provide an update that would reflect greater diversity and inclusivity in the programs of studies across all subject areas. This much-needed renewal to the planned curriculum took the voices of many important parties into consideration: students and parents, teachers and educational leaders, as well as voices of people from diverse political, racial, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds to ensure that a fuller picture of our shared reality would be taught in schools. The focus on mental health and supports for struggling students was improving across various school districts under the support of this provincial leadership.

When the United Conservative Party (UCP) won the provincial election in spring 2019, another shift occurred—this time one that cut the education budget at all levels, and in so doing

limited the mandate of what a quality education might entail. The cuts continue as I write, and the UCP is now proposing a Choice in Education bill, which they tout as increasing parent choice but which is a threat to public education as a whole and opens the door to increased privatization (which increases their desired link between education and the goals of the economy). The UCP's Ministry of Education is taking further steps toward diminishing the breadth and depth of what curriculum and pedagogy might offer children. With these limiting, short-sighted perspectives that lack both integrity and a thorough understanding of the field of curriculum, and what the point of educating our young might be, one cannot fully predict whether or how concerns of mental health will be prioritized in educational jurisdictions around the province.

While I do not wish to get embroiled in a political discussion, this brief description points to the futility of focusing on the future alone, as it is impossible to predict with any degree of certainty what exactly the future will hold. To this end, by drawing upon what students are saying now, we can gain insights into how significant adults in their lives might best show up to and for them as they learn and grow.

The mental health concerns outlined throughout this dissertation affect many of the students we teach. As I write this final chapter, in fall 2020, globally we are living in unprecedented times. The world is being shaped by significant events that highlight the need for trauma-informed care and pedagogy more than ever. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has devastated countries and citizens everywhere in the world. The Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests, at this time further spurred by the murder of George Floyd, a black American, by a white police officer in Minnesota, is causing many people—myself included—to wake up to the tragic effects of systemic racism. Both the pandemic and the world-wide anti-racism protests and discussions are understandably bringing forth many big feelings for people. Fear, anxiety, anger,

and lack of control are some of the main emotions being experienced. We are being forced to take stock of what matters and how we wish to respond. We are being forced to re-set individually and collectively. The main concern about widespread disconnect caused by colonialism's legacy of relationship denial, along with the four sub-problems I outlined earlier—lack of an inner guide, the hectic pace of life, misguided neoliberal priorities, and a faulty school structure—are all being shaken. The response to these global calls—individually and collectively—is waking us up to the world beyond ourselves. Bearing this in mind, I proceed hopefully—leaning into that which sustains me in order to contribute meaningfully to the larger discussion on wellness, starting by paying attention to the needs of the youngest and most vulnerable in our midst.

When students return to in-person classes from their extended school leave due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), their bodies, brains, and hearts will have been shaped by the unfolding world around them. How might educators best support young people through this? Further, as we contend on a societal and global level with issues related to ongoing individual and systemic racism, it is vital that we teach and live in a way that not only changes the narrative but also changes the actions taken. As the statistics indicate—including the rise of suicide, depression, and anxiety in young people—more and more children and youth are unsure of where to turn for direction. All of this not only invites but demands an attentive, insightful response from adults and educators.

It is through being aware of time as sacred, prioritizing attunement, and living in such a way that we are being “really Real” that educators will be able to authentically share life with students in a way that also invites them to pay attention to these points in their own lives.

Recognizing the practical commonplaces of curriculum as the way in which this discussion may be enlivened, milieu emerged as a way to link school with the larger world and with life itself.

By doing our own inner work and not only focusing on outward successes, adults can model for children the difficult balancing act involved in finding a resonance between internal knowing and external action-taking. By attuning—taking care of ourselves as four-part people in order to genuinely meet another—it becomes possible to turn outward in a “really Real” way that best supports ourselves and others. Further, if the human lives lost, relational disconnect experienced, and economic downturn of COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that the health and well-being of individual people and humanity as a whole are more important than economic growth. Market Logic cannot guide us through these bigger questions of life and living. Concerns about time and place and the over- or under-emphasis placed on each remind us that we may unconsciously be passing on misled biases to the next generation. Our cultural obsession with time paired with a lack of connection to our roots and the places that form and inform us, perpetuate the burdens placed upon children. Finally, the foundations of our very school structures are being shaken up. Confronted with so much outer change of late, schools may be able to re-imagine what change might look like from the inside out. How might schools be places that honour the sacred, value the health and wellness of everyone in their community, and allow children to connect with their bodies in a wise way? What if this work could be done not only on an individual level but also a collective one?

### **How Might We Proceed Pedagogically?**

Recognizing that work surrounding well-being and wholeness such as this cannot ever reach a static conclusion, in this section, I outline some final dynamic ideas to ponder. If the key points learned in this research stem from the relationship denial experienced by all (as a

disconnect from self, others, and the natural world) due to the legacy of colonialism, a healing of these rifts is a meaningful place to begin work together. As Battiste (2013) writes, “the decolonization of education is not just about changing a system for Indigenous peoples, but for everyone. We all will benefit by it” (p. 22). In the context of this work, decolonizing education points to renewing relationships in order to experience connection, first with ourselves as four-part people and then reaching outward toward others. Davis et al. (2020) take up the work of Wilson (2016) in writing that “it is through land-based education that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can be furthered” (p. 126). I wonder, too, if reconciliation with others might be further enhanced through a sort of self-reconciliation. Perhaps by each of us as four-part people turning toward our roots—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—we can gather a more connected sense of self in order to contribute meaningfully to being “really Real” in relation to others.

In the field of education, Rendón (2009) writes about this as “engaging the complexities of teaching and learning as they related to the harmony of the world” (p. 6). As articulated throughout this dissertation, the problems of relationship denial are complex. Pinar (2012) writes that “curriculum theory is, in effect, a form of autobiographically informed truth-telling that articulates the educational experience of teachers and students as lived” (p. 35). The educational experience of many teachers and students is currently impoverished. How might new life-giving spirit be breathed into curriculum? This life-giving energy comes by honouring the realm of the sacred within education.

This research has sought to open life up, to see curriculum and life as “wondrous” and whole no matter what we each face in our own lives (Seidel, 2014a). A curriculum of attunement, then, is one where educators and students alike are invited to turn inward to establish

connectedness in order to best turn outward. Recognizing the sacredness of time, honouring the importance one's inner wisdom, and embodying this new way of being "really Real" is what this study offers the field of curriculum and pedagogy. Enhanced connectedness is vital to addressing the mental health concerns and lack of embodiment experienced by many young people today.

In this time when "our actions are all too frequently driven rather than undertaken in awareness" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 9), it is important to remember that "renewal as curriculum work rejects the latest panacea to correct the so-called failure of schools" (Krasny, 2009, p. 2). Wisdom traditions emphasize *being*. In classrooms, "being able to help students find and negotiate the joy, wonder, happiness, and pain in the everydayness of life is an increasingly important quality" (Maatta & Uusiautti, 2011, p. 37). To aid them in doing so, students need skills and attitudes such as body awareness, emotional literacy, and empathy. This dissertation proposes that it is also important for students to connect with themselves, both to foster their own humanity and to experience a sense of wholeness that emerges from the inside out. This is one way to counter-act the disconnect that many students have experienced as relationship denial (with self and others). It may be time to pay increased attention to aspects of being that are "fundamental to a fully human life" (Noddings, 2006, p. 238). This is where wholeness and well-being might spring from.

Rather than offering a summarized analysis of the research findings or a disembodied conclusion that does not feel fully linked with the entirety of the study, I offer insights to educators (in-service and pre-service), school leaders, researchers, and adults involved in the lives of young people as to how we might proceed pedagogically in a way that highlights the importance of living in the tension of not knowing exactly how to proceed, but doing our best to sit with the research findings. This whole project, with its multiple methods of working with the

data and its meandering embodied methodologies, allows contemplation about ways in which to live with awareness and in turn, experience enhanced wholeness and well-being. My hope has been to embody wisdom, wholeness, and well-being throughout. Not to write *about* it, but rather to write from, for, with, and through wisdom.

The role of wisdom traditions, the perspectives granted through viewing the world in an animated manner, has come to bear on my life in tangible ways. By learning from the children in this research study how to more acutely pay attention to that which makes me well and allows me to feel whole, I am better able to attend to these needs in the students with whom I work. My transformation as a pedagogue does not only apply to my role as educational researcher, but also to daily life as a four-part person embodied in my professional roles as a teacher, counsellor, and leader. In returning to work in schools again after time away for my dissertation studies, it is evident how the theoretical and practical realms rely upon one another to co-exist in a healthy way. To get too caught up in the day-to-day craziness of teaching and learning with students is unfortunate, as educators can lose touch with that which really matters in their interactions with children. Alternately, to get too focused on writing *about* education without fully immersing ourselves in it (if research and teaching at the university level remain distant), to spend much time contemplating without putting into action that which has been learned, is also doing ourselves and children a disservice.

During my time away from the classroom, I pondered the importance of all these insights and how they directly impact my way of being as an educator. I sought to recognize what really matters, no matter how many overwhelming district initiatives or minute details about how to best track assessments or how to best ensure that all curricular outcomes mandated in Programs of Study are met. What matters is building quality relationships with young people so that they

can be their best selves—to see them and treat them as four-part people and to honour their uniqueness by fostering their ability to interact with their own inner wisdom by attuning to their needs and providing opportunities for them to be “really Real.”

I had a sense, with Noddings (2006), that “to get started on this task, we have to listen to our students” (p. 239). To undertake this call, I took to heart Kabat-Zinn’s advice (1994): “The best way to capture moments is to pay attention” (p. 17). The data in this dissertation was gathered by paying attention and allowing these captured moments to resonate. As educators, the ongoing invitation is to pay attention to students as human beings. When their humanity is acknowledged, there is a chance that they may experience enhanced wholeness in their lives. As Soutter, O’Steen, and Gilmore (2012) emphasize, “being well in school is intricately tied to wellbeing in the multiple and interwoven spheres of one’s life” (p. 113). These interwoven aspects point to the importance of creating classroom communities that honour well-being so that the young are given the opportunity to embody this wholeness in other spheres that make up their world as well. True holistic educators—those connected to the sacred—know how to offer “space for stories not typically told during the course of the school day and for a wide range of emotional responses and connections—happiness, joy, pleasure, fear, grief, and sadness” (Kind et al., 2005, p. 37). These connections, and the sharing thereof, may be a way to move beyond the prescriptive thinking of “systematic intervention” and “safer schools” (Cohen, 2006, p. 215) in order to break through the typical boring “scope- and sequence-related synthesis” (p. 220). Noddings (2006) responds to Cohen’s technocratic article by gently expressing how

It is not simply a matter of teaching students topics and skills associated with social-emotional learning. It is essentially a matter of showing, by our own acts and attitudes,



that we care about what our students are going through and that we are partners in the search for meaning. (p. 240)

This is a showing, a knowledge-as-a-verb type of action, an embodiment, a way of being. It is here where attending to the sacred and the inner life fits into this search for meaning, for wholeness. Indigenous ontology recognizes and shares “that knowledge is sacred... and that it is holistic in that it always already acknowledges four dimensions—the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual” (Haig-Brown, 2008, pp. 12-13). And so an ending, much like a beginning.

### ***Honouring Connection***

I now return to my research question: “What are the pedagogical implications of children’s understandings and expressions of wholeness and well-being?” The implications of this work are far-reaching, including children who are in touch with what it is that makes them well and then building upon this to become human beings who care about that which they are learning and working on since they recognize the bearing it has on the world and their lives. Educators and students who are able to find a necessary pause within the school day in order to inwardly attune and then outwardly act in a “really Real” manner enhance their overall connection and way of being in the world.

The students in this research got excited about our time together each week, in part because it led them to feel differently than most of their other experiences in school. In the life of a researcher, this connection happens when the subject matter becomes more than abstract ideas and instead becomes part of one’s being due to the fact that learning more about the phenomenon (initially cognitively) feels essential to one’s wellness as a four-part person. In the life of an educator, this connection may take place when linking the outcomes from the Program of Studies with the lived experiences of students in ways that make the ideas and concepts relative in their

lives. This connection may also come from cultivating authentic, meaningful relationships with students. Paying attention to the sacred and living in an embodied way shifts our approach to life. Rather than focusing on physical and mental mastery alone, attending to the emotional and spiritual aspects of our being becomes paramount. By attuning to ourselves, we are in turn enhancing our attunement with life itself.

### **Understanding the Difficulty**

Throughout the research for and writing of this dissertation, I have learned the importance of not rushing to solve problems (an approach that often exacerbates problems). To cite Chambers (2003), “the solution may be in understanding the difficulty rather than trying to find a way to make it go away” (p. 228). By undertaking my work in this manner, I have hope in the possibility that we may come closer to “solving” these grand problems when more of us are able to truly sit with complexity and difficulty without becoming numb or melting down.

Based on my work with the ten research participants, here I offer some reflections that seek to honour the complexity of our interactions—and life itself. I learned so much from these children. One understanding is that we are each complete, sacred, whole beings, just as we are. Embody this. One moment at a time. Another is that it is important for each of us to get to know ourselves and what it is that makes us feel complete and most authentically like ourselves at our core—this attunement may be what will carry us through. The children also taught me the importance of showing up for life—to know that we are wise, just as we are. That we are all experimenting, trying our best, making mistakes and doing some things well, learning and growing through it all. This is what being a four-part person is all about.

I build on these key understandings from the participants, not as a conclusion to the discussion, but rather as a stepping point from which to embark on putting into action that which

this research has highlighted. First, disembodied learning is not learning that lasts. While schools have come a long way in promoting a measure of physical and mental wellness, this research reveals that students' physical bodies need to become more relevant in every subject area, so that their understandings move beyond head learning to also include heart- and body-knowing (embodiment). Making our schools more compassionate and literate in the language around wellness is a good starting point for this (see *Creating a Compassionate Classroom*, 2015; EPSB, 2018; EPSB, 2019).

Second, relationships with self and others are key. Healthy internal connection (through attunement and checking in with ourselves) is essential for healthy external connection (living in a way that is “really Real”). It is important for school staff to cultivate healthy interactions with students, starting the first week of school and continuing all year long. Rather than over-emphasizing lesson and unit plans, begin by setting the tone for quality connections (between educators and students, amongst teachers, amongst children, and for each child with their inner knowing).

Third, this research has made clear that for education to have a lasting holistic effect on children as four-part people and so our communities, schools would do well to welcome that which is sacred into the learning endeavour. I am not advocating for religious education, but rather opening the conversation to consider what it might look like to treat education as sacred, including each interaction within. This will require a shift in understandings of time and will likely look like a slowing down in schools, exploring topics of research in depth and making personal, embodied connections to the content.

Fourth, this research found that in order for children to experience wholeness, they need to connect with their inner wisdom and recognize that insight and guidance can be found within,

rather than primarily in external messages. This attunement is key in discussions about mental health, and to assist the young in recognizing where genuine insight and authority resides in their lives: internally, externally, and in the sacred realm.

Finally, a lasting finding of this research is that both children and adults need opportunities to be “really Real.” Being “really Real” is enacted by being honest and authentic with those around us, and is enhanced through learning how to find a connection with the inner truth that guides us. It is my hope that schools are places where children and youth do not have to put on a false face in order to succeed, but that they can be “really Real” by embodying the full gamut of emotions and experiences that makes them who they are.

### ***Practical Insights for the Classroom Teacher***

Some practical insights that educators may find helpful in their practice have also emerged from this doctoral research. Many educators and pedagogues are already attuned to these knowings and put them into action regularly. At the basic level, children do not care about how “perfect” the classroom looks—excessive laminating or colour-coding or putting up one more poster are acts more important to educators than students. Reconsider the time and energy put into such activities.

Next, young people want us to notice them as individuals. What is it about each student that makes them unique? Connecting with them on this level is important for their sense of self, our relationship with them, and our ongoing connection with each child within the classroom walls. In addition, what works for one student does not necessarily work for another. In paying attention to the uniqueness of each child, teachers can ensure that all young people are best able to learn and be themselves.

Further, find moments to pause, to slow, to linger with students throughout each day. How might a peaceful environment be fostered that invites students into deep learning together rather than rushing from one thing to the next and creating a frantic feeling in the classroom? Slowing down with one another allows for a different kind of growth.

Additionally, a main aspect of teaching well is about becoming comfortable with “indwelling between two curricular worlds” (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005a, p. 159). While it is important to ensure children are learning the curriculum-as-plan (the provincially-mandated standards that outline the essential learning outcomes), it is equally vital to draw upon the curriculum-as-lived as a guide for interactions in our classrooms and in life. The lived curriculum focuses on meeting student needs as individuals and relationship building. I hope that educators are able to blend these two worlds, one dependent upon the other, without touting the glories of one aspect alone. Living in the tension of the in-between is key.

In the spirit of dwelling in the midst of the unknown, we each need to take time for ourselves—doing what we love, exploring that which interests us beyond schools, as well as focusing on what it is that feeds us internally. If educators are not fed as four-part people (emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically), how can we expect to be there for our students?

Finally, it is of essence to be real in the classroom with our students. While I am not suggesting that we over-share about the various emotions and experiences that we are facing, I am proposing that it is unhealthy to pretend that everything is perfect all the time. Teachers often can get caught up in this “think positive” frame of mind, which limits full expression and experience of the various feelings that may come up (for adults and children). How might we

gain awareness about when we are operating out of our false self, and make note of it in order to be authentic more often.

These insights may support educators in keeping perspective on what it is that truly matters in the lives we share with young people on a daily basis. By paying attention to teaching practice in this manner, strides can be made toward rebuilding relationships previously denied in order to enhance inward and outward connections, and through this, toward dismantling the ongoing and pervasive legacies of colonialism in school systems.

### **The Cycle Begins Anew**

*I know that my spirit belongs  
to the Spirit of all Spirit  
I know I belong to the city  
of those who have no place.  
But to find my way there  
I need to let go of my knowing.*

-Rumi (in Mafi & Kolin, 2009, p. 159)

In the educational endeavour, it is evident that there is no beginning and no end, merely the ongoing rhythm of the day and night, of the months and seasons, of one year followed by another with different, unique students. In many realms of education, the discourse revolves around finding solutions, coming up with finalized results or answers that eventually fade from relevance. This discourse also focuses on creating generalizable plans for how to proceed that pay little attention to the individuality of students as four-part people. This research (and my personal experience through doing this research) has revealed that educators ought to allow themselves to turn inward in addition to outward tendencies, to live in a healthy tension of the internal and external realms. Attunement is a way of honouring ourselves as four-part people. A weighty implication of educators turning inward is that it will likely encourage and foster a similar movement in students. Here lies wisdom that will not fall by the wayside with a new education

minister, a new government, a new subject-specific Program of Study that promises to fill all the gaps left previously.

Let this embodiment be an example of dwelling in the unknown, of allowing the questions to guide rather than restricting ourselves to answers that do not—cannot—fit for all. By attuning in order to connect with inner ways of knowing and being, it becomes possible to make connections with others and with the greater external world by living in a “really Real” way rooted in wisdom. In North America, this would provide space for a quieting in educational institutions—an attunement to and honouring of emotional and spiritual ways of being as a part of the natural wholeness involved in being a four-part person. This recognizes at once both the importance and impermanence of our role on this earth. This gentle turn, internal and external alike, may be a way to attend to the sacred and to honour the well-being of the young in our midst. Their embodied wholeness is what makes our work worthwhile.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### *Week-by-week outline of activities*

- Week**   **Activities** (see complete Activity descriptions in another Appendix)
- 1**   -start with a picture book read-aloud  
-focus on Breathing Activities:
- Listen To Your Breath
  - The Tiger
  - Shake it Out
- create individual Art Portfolios/“Joy Folders”  
-end with a Sharing Circle
- 2**   -start with a picture book read-aloud – Goldilocks & the Three Bears
- Discuss the concept of something being “just right”, as the story talks about and in relation to ideas of joy and happiness
- review basic breathing techniques  
-focus on Imaginative Movement Activities:
- Atmosphere Walks
  - Individual Pantomime
  - Where Am I? Pantomime
- create an art piece: “Just Right” postcards  
-end with a Sharing Circle
- 3**   -start with a picture book read-aloud – something about animals  
-focus on Imaginative Movement Activities:
- Individual Pantomime
  - Escape! Pantomime
  - Animal Dramatic Expression
- create an art piece: Animal calendar pages  
-end with a Sharing Circle
- 4**   -start with a picture book read-aloud – something about emotions  
-focus on Concentration and Connecting with Emotions Activities:
- Capture! Pantomime
  - Listen to the Room
  - Emotion Actions
- create an art piece: “How do you feel today?” Emotion face drawings  
-end with a Sharing Circle
- 5**   \*DATA COLLECTION DAY: created art pieces and Life Writing paragraphs  
-start with a picture book read-aloud – something about nature/the outdoors  
-brainstorm definitions for words such as joy, well-being, happiness, etc.  
-go through a Guided Visualization activity (Hart, 2001)



- create an art piece: Joy found in Nature
  - write about a phenomena from your life that connects to your art piece
  - end with a Sharing Circle
- 6** \*DATA COLLECTION DAY: created art pieces and Life Writing paragraphs
- start with a picture book read-aloud – something about mapping important places
  - play Pictionary with words related to joy and well-being
  - go through an Imaginary Trip Visualization activity (Pura, 2002)
  - create an art piece: A place of joy in your life (label it, make it like a map of sorts)
  - write about the place you drew and how it makes you feel
  - end with a Sharing Circle
- 7** \*DATA COLLECTION DAY: created art pieces and Life Writing paragraphs
- start with a picture book read-aloud – *The Gift of Nothing* (McDonnell)
  - play Charades with words related to joy and well-being
  - go through Breathwork Visualization (Zhao)
  - create an art piece: someone who brings you joy
  - write about this person who adds joy and happiness to your life & their importance
  - end with a Sharing Circle
- 8** \*DATA COLLECTION DAY: created art pieces and Life Writing paragraphs
- start with a picture book read-aloud – *Guess How Much I Love You* (McBratney)
  - review basic breathing techniques
  - go through a Sphere of Light Visualization
  - create an art piece: individual choice; something that brings them feelings of joy
  - write about a specific moment in your life where you experienced these emotions
  - end with a Sharing Circle
- 9**
- start with a picture book read-aloud
  - Muscle Relaxation Activity
  - Elastic Band Imagination Exercise
  - create a transitional object for each child to keep as a memory of the work we did together once I'm gone: this object will be a sketchbook (“Joy Book”) and today we will design a fancy cover for it, using collage and mixed media techniques
  - end with a Sharing Circle
- \*DATA COLLECTION: conduct individual interviews (to be semi-structured, focused around art creations and Life Writing from weeks 5-8, 15-20 minutes per participant, approximately 3 interviews per session – each will be audio recorded)
- 10**
- start with a picture book read-aloud
  - Roll-Over Relaxation Activity
  - Positive Imagining Activity
  - in the “Joy Book”, complete a Values Activity & finish designing the cover

-end with a Sharing Circle  
\*DATA COLLECTION: conduct individual interviews (to be semi-structured, focused around art creations and Life Writing from weeks 5-8, 15-20 minutes per participant, approximately 3 interviews per session – each will be audio recorded)

- 11**
- start with a picture book read-aloud
  - review basic breathing techniques
  - choice time: repeat a guided group activity or two of their choice
  - in the “Joy Book”, complete a writing activity: “What would [someone they trust and respect] do?”
  - end with a Sharing Circle
  - \*DATA COLLECTION: conduct individual interviews (to be semi-structured, focused around art creations and Life Writing from weeks 5-8, 15-20 minutes per participant, approximately 3 interviews per session – each will be audio recorded)
- 12**
- start with a picture book read-aloud
  - choice time: repeat a guided group activity or two of their choice
  - large group celebratory activity
  - in the “Joy Book”, create a chart outlining how they currently spend their free time alongside their hopes/dreams of how they would like to be spending their time
  - end with a Sharing Circle

## Appendix B

### *Semi-structured Interview Questions for pre-adolescent research participants*

1. How old are you?
2. Which activity during this project did you like the best?
3. Why did you enjoy it? How did it make you feel?
4. [looking at the artwork created by participant during the study] Can you tell me how you were feeling while you created this artwork?
5. Is there a time in your life (outside of our study together) when you can remember experiencing some of those same feelings? Tell me about it.
6. What is one of your best memories ever of something that is part of your life so far?
7. What made that moment so great?
8. [Now let's look at your creative writing (about a moment in their life when they experienced joy and happiness).] Please read your written piece to me. Now close your eyes and think about that experience. How did you feel at that time?
9. Can you remember where you sensed that feeling in your body? Place your hands there. Use descriptive words to tell me what it feels like.
10. How are you feeling today? Can you tell me a little bit about what's going on in your life to make you feel that way? Where in your body do you sense that feeling the most?
11. What does 'happiness' mean to you? How about 'joy'?
12. What are parts of your life that make you happy and joyful? Can you give me some examples of why they make you feel that way? How does joy feel in your body? Where do you feel it?

## Appendix C

### *Stages of Guided Imagery*

While the following example activity is not used directly as the data collection method, I draw upon Allan's (2008) four stages as a guide to how to organize the data collection in weeks 5-8. The themes and guided imagery that I will use with my participants are not the same as those he proposed, yet the general flow of the stages remains consistent. I add a fifth stage, outlined below.

-Earth, Fire, Water, and Sun: Archetypal Art Education with School Children (adapted from Allan, 2008, pp. 116-145). This activity has four stages for each of the four themes, as outlined below. The four themes (Earth, Fire, Water, and Sun) will each be completed in successive weeks.

Stage One: Stimulation through Discussion. The researcher leads a discussion surrounding creativity and imagination on the board, having students brainstorm ideas of words/images having to do with one of the main themes.

Stage Two: Relaxation and Guided Imagery. Students close their eyes while the researcher slowly reads through the words the class came up with, encouraging students to come up with images in their mind to connect with the theme.

Stage Three: Artwork. Students are asked to choose one of the images that stood out to them and immediately after they open their eyes, to draw/paint it on paper. The focus is not artistic talent but rather the feeling the student is experiencing in relation to the artwork.

Stage Four: Viewing and Discussing the Products. Participants have an opportunity to look at each other's work and make comments. A large-group discussion led by the researcher will conclude the activity, emphasizing that there can be multiple interpretations of the theme.

-this entire activity is meant to help students connect their bodily feelings with their creative imaginations, allowing for a bond between the body, heart, and mind.

-see full text of the relaxation and imagery piece to be read by the researcher in Allan's book *Inscapes of the Child's World*, pp. 131-137.

Stage Five: Life Writing. After sharing the artwork with fellow participants and participating in a group discussion of what was created and the emotions experienced while doing so, students will be given a piece of paper and a pen/marker to write a story about a time in their life when they experienced a similar sensation to that focused on in their art work. These life writing excerpts, along with the previously created artwork and subsequent interviews, will be used as data sources.

## Appendix D

### *Ethical Considerations*

Since my research was conducted with school-age children, I was well aware of the potential for ethical issues to arise. I informed myself of many of these issues by completing the online ethics training through the University of Alberta website. Further, through situating myself in the literature surrounding well-being and wisdom traditions, I came to clearly recognize the importance of wisely considering all possible scenarios when working with children.

One of the main ethical issues that I was aware of in my work was that of fair and equitable treatment of participants. Since I worked with students aged 9-11 in a particular classroom from one school, there was the potential for too many children to want to be involved in my study. In order to conduct my research in a just manner, I took the following steps to do my best in treating all students fairly and equitably:

1. I limited participants to those of one particular class, with support and approval from the school principal and classroom teacher.
2. Upon receiving parental consent forms for the students involved in my study, all permitted participants were involved in the various stages of data collection, as outlined above.
3. All students with signed consent forms were given personal assent forms to sign after hearing a detailed description of what the research project entails. Everyone who decided to assent became the participants in each aspect of the study for the full twelve weeks.

A second potential ethical issue that I was attuned to is regarding concern for the mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health of my participants. While I did not feel as though

the risks were significant, I was aware that providing children with the opportunity to visualize and meditate (albeit with guidance) and create their own artistic images and life writing pieces may cause them slight mental, emotional, or spiritual stress. While the emphasis was placed upon creating images and writing stories that reflect experiences of wholeness and well-being and expressions thereof, the possibility for difficult emotions to arise was understood. If any strong emotions were to be displayed, I was prepared to provide students with the opportunity to talk about this with me if they wished. Further, I was aware of who the school counselor or resource support contact was at Mirror Lake School and informed him or her of the activities I was doing with the students and when and where I was conducting them. The classroom teacher was also fully informed of the specific activities I did with the participants so that he/she would be prepared to further listen to individual students as needed. Parents/guardians of participants received a general breakdown of the activities planned with the students, outlining the details of what day these were completed, so as to be aware of potential emotional, spiritual, mental, and psychological stress experienced by their children at any given moment throughout the research process. Students were informed that they could talk to any of these trusted adults as they wish, as well as that they were allowed to withdraw their assent to participate at any point in time as the activities progressed.

I was conscious of “power differences” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 107) throughout, and tried my best to ensure that my participants were comfortable with me and with all of the activities during each stage of data collection. By being aware of these potential ethical issues that could have arisen during my dissertation research, I had confidence in my ability to handle obstacles as they arise. My sensitivity to the students themselves as well as their individual needs and experiences provided me with an ethical stance from which to work.

By engaging with students in a manner that acknowledges them as four-part people, this research project was designed in such a way as to provide the young with opportunities to contemplate their own wholeness and well-being. Embracing wisdom traditions and wellness as a way of being in the world, it is my hope that this work was able to demonstrate the multi-layered connections of what living a life of meaning might entail.



## **Appendix E**

### ***Parent/Guardian Information Letter and Consent Form***

**University of Alberta**  
**Department of Secondary Education**  
Faculty of Education

#### **PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Study: The Holistic Well-being of Children**

**Principal Investigator:** Mandy Krahn, Doctoral Student at the University of Alberta

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#### **Why is my child being asked to take part in this research study?**

Your child is being asked to be in this study because it is recognized that children at this age level have valuable insight into well-being and are able to think about questions of joy and happiness from a unique pre-adolescent perspective. This research is being conducted with students in the grade 4/5 class at Mirror Lake School who obtain parental/guardian consent.

#### **Background**

As a teacher of elementary and junior high students in both Alberta and Manitoba as well as in the country of Guatemala, I have began wondering what it is that might contribute toward the holistic well-being of the young. I am concerned with the over-emphasis on preparing children for the future without focusing on them as important people today. And so I am interested in exploring how all human beings may live a deeper and more wisely informed existence. By wondering what living a life of happiness and joy may take into account, this study with students from the grade 4/5 class at Mirror Lake School is a chance to think about how educators and students may live and learn together in a manner that enhances both individual and group well-being.

#### **What is the reason for doing the study?**

This study is being done because I see the need for teachers to re-think what happiness and joy may look like in the lives of students, and to consider how this may impact their classroom. By doing various activities and talking with the research participants, the hope is to hear ideas and stories from the students directly as to how they experience wellness in their lives.

## **Purpose**

The overall purpose of the study is to create a space of learning that is based upon joy and well-being and not focused only on academic success. This research provides the opportunity for participants to be a part of activities that incorporate the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental sides of themselves.

## **What will my child be asked to do?**

- Your child will be in the study for 12 weeks, for half a school day each week.
- Once a week for half a day, your child will be asked to join the researcher and the other study participants in a pull-out space at Mirror Lake School to participate in activities geared toward overall well-being.
- During each week, your child and all of the students involved in the study will read stories together, take part in exercises that require them to use their imagination (eg: “Imagine you are walking through a thick forest...”) and guided breath work (eg: “Close your eyes and focus on the feeling of your breath as it passes your nose on the way in, and on the way out...”), participate in drama activities, create art projects, write about life experiences, and share their thoughts and feelings with the researcher and the group mates.
- Close to the end of the 12 weeks, the researcher will conduct an individual interview with your child to talk about some things they have done as a group, such as the artwork they created and the experiences they shared in writing. It will take about half an hour to do this, and these interviews will be audio recorded. The participants will each be asked to answer some questions about what makes them happy and brings joy to their life, and to think about why those things do and some other things don’t and how wellness is reflected in their daily life.

## **Study Procedures**

The researcher will visit Mirror Lake School for the research study once a week over 12 weeks, and the activities for the study will take approximately half a day each visit. The first four weeks will focus on building community, by sharing the research space together and participating in weekly Sharing Circles and story read-alouds. Students will be led in breathing and drama exercises to help them get in touch with their bodies. Guided art activities will be led by the researcher, who will photograph each piece and return originals to the students.

The middle four weeks will be when the majority of the data collection will be done. At this stage, each week students will create a piece of art following a theme provided by the researcher. Next, the children will be given the chance to write short reflections that highlight a specific experience and moment they had in their life that connects somehow with the feeling brought up when creating their piece of art. The stories written by the children are a form of writing about their lives that will come from their own creative artwork. These art pieces and written paragraphs will be placed in their folders to later be used as a conversation starter or prompt for the individual interviews (which will take place in the last four weeks of the study).

The final month of the research study will be an opportunity to conduct individual interviews (20-30 minutes each, to be audio recorded and transcribed) as well as a time to conclude our large

group activities and gradually release the students' reliance on our time together. Through talking with the children about their artwork and writing and the feelings they experienced throughout the entire process, participants will be able to fully acknowledge the many emotions that come up and will be encouraged to draw upon the breathing techniques they have learned in order to make sense of and gain increased understanding about these experiences. These final four weeks will also include a re-visiting of many breathing and drama exercises that the students were introduced to in the first month of the study to provide them with a strong base of understanding and personal resiliency.

The researcher will collect data in the forms of classroom observations and field notes, textual/visual samples in the form of art pieces and paragraphs written by participants, and individual semi-structured interviews. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Artistic and writing samples will be photographed and brought to the interviews with students to further learn about the ways in which each child understands and expresses their well-being.

### **What are the benefits to my child?**

This research will provide an opportunity for the student participants to reflect on and better understand factors that contribute to their own happiness and well-being. This in turn may help them build resiliency as individuals and learn how to best take care of themselves and others in order to live as whole beings in the world. Another benefit may be that these participants could alter school culture at Mirror Lake through their contact and interactions with teachers and other students, so that others in the school community are more attentive to notions of wellness. Thus, the potential benefits are for the participants themselves, as well as for other students and staff at Mirror Lake School. However, it must be clear that your child may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

### **What are the risks and discomforts?**

There is the possibility of participants being disturbed due to some of the content that may individually arise from drawing and writing about their life experiences. The researcher will incorporate a discussion and activity about strategies for how to handle and work through difficult emotions into each group meeting, prior to ending the session. Further, the Mirror Lake School counselor/liaison/resource support member, the researcher, and the classroom teacher will be available for students to talk with individually if they are upset or distressed and require assistance in working through these issues.

### **Does my child have to take part in the study?**

Allowing your child to be in this study is your choice. If you decide to allow him/her to be in the study, you can still change your mind later. If you choose to stop allowing your child from being in the study at any time during the 12 weeks of data collection or up until two weeks following the individual interviews, please contact the researcher at 780-\*\*\*-\*\*\*\*. If data has been collected from the participant prior to withdrawal from the study, this data will be removed from the study as well.

### **Will my child's information be kept private?**

Yes, it will be kept confidential. Throughout the 12 weeks, the artwork and writing created by the participants will be kept in individual folders to be brought out each week. The researcher will be in charge of keeping these folders safe. At the end of the 12 weeks, all names will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms, and the researcher will lock all data in a filing cabinet in her office at the University of Alberta. Only the researcher, Mandy Krahn, and her supervisor, Dr. Dwayne Donald, will have access to this data. All information acquired, including creative writing, artwork, and transcription data from the individual interviews will be kept confidential and stored securely. When publicly reporting data or sharing results of this study in presentations, articles, or reports, all identifying markers on any material will be removed, deleted, or covered up to help retain anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms and generic descriptions of the research site will be used. At the University of Alberta, we keep data stored for 5 years after the end of the study, at which time it will be destroyed.

### **Additional Information**

All of this information is provided in order for you to make an informed decision on whether or not you will allow your son/daughter to participate. Before you make a decision the researcher will go over this form with you. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

### **What if I have questions?**

If you have any questions about the research now or later, please contact Mandy Krahn via email at [mandy.krahn@ualberta.ca](mailto:mandy.krahn@ualberta.ca).

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615. This office has no affiliation with the study investigator.

One copy of the signed consent form will be for the researcher, and one will be provided to you for your records. Once you have approved your child to be a part of the study, he or she will further be asked if he/she wants to participate and to sign an assent form indicating his/her choice.

**PARENTAL CONSENT**

**Title of Study:** The Holistic Well-being of Children

**Principal Investigator:** Mandy Krahn, doctoral student at the University of Alberta

**Phone Number(s):**

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Do you understand that your child has been asked to be in a research study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that your child is free to leave the study at any time, without having to give a reason?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand who will have access to the information your child provides?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Who explained this study to you? _____		
I agree for my child to take part in this study:		
Signature of Parent/Guardian of the Research Participant _____		
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian _____		
Printed Name of Research Participant _____		
Date: _____		
<b>THE INFORMATION SHEET MUST BE ATTACHED TO THIS CONSENT FORM AND A COPY GIVEN TO THE PARENT/GUARDIAN OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT</b>		

## **Appendix F**

### ***Research Assent Form***

University of Alberta  
**Department of Secondary Education**  
Faculty of Education

**Project Title: The Holistic Well-being of Children**  
**Principal Investigator: Mandy Krahn, Doctoral Student at the University of Alberta**

#### **What is a research study?**

- A research study is a way to find out new information about something. Children do not need to be in a research study if they don't want to.

#### **Why are you being asked to be part of this research study?**

- You are being asked to take part in this research study because I am trying to learn more about joy and wellness in the lives of children like you. I am asking you to be in the study because all students from the grade 4/5 class at Mirror Lake School have been invited to participate, and I think you will have some good ideas to share.

#### **If you join the study what will happen to you?**

I want to tell you about some things that will happen to you if you are in this study.

- You will be in the study for 12 weeks, for half a school day each week.
- During each week, you and all of the students involved in the study will read stories, take part in some exercises that focus on your imagination and your breathing, do some drama activities, create art projects, write about life experiences, and share thoughts and feelings with the researcher and the group mates.
- Close to the end of the 12 weeks, I will ask you to sit with me and talk about some things we have done as a group, such as the artwork you created and the experiences you shared in writing. It will take about half an hour to do this.
- I will ask you to answer some questions about what makes you happy and brings joy to your life, and to think about why those things do and some other things don't.

#### **Will any part of the study hurt?**

No part of this study will hurt you. But because I will be asking you some questions about your thoughts and feelings about your life, some of the things you might think and feel may bring up some difficult memories for you. We will talk about these things, no matter if they're good or bad, in a safe place and in a way that makes you feel as comfortable as possible about it.

#### **Will the study help you?**

By participating in this study, you will learn many different things about how to handle strong feelings that you have, and it will hopefully help you find creative ways to live life well.

**Will the study help others?**

This study might find out things that will help teachers and other adults to recognize how children experience happiness. Thanks to your interactions with others at the school, it also may help other children at Mirror Lake School to learn from you healthy ways to respond to difficult situations.

**Do your parents know about this study?**

- This study was explained to your parents and they said that I could ask you if you want to be in it. You can talk this over with them before you decide.

**Who will see the information collected about you?**

- The information collected about you during this study will be kept safely locked up. Nobody will know it except the people doing the research (Ms. Krahn and her supervisor).
- The study information about you will not be given to your parents or teachers. The researcher will not tell your friends or anyone else.

**What do you get for being in the study?**

- At the end of the study, you will get a special notebook from the researcher to continue drawing and writing about your life experiences.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

- You do not have to be in the study. No one will be upset if you don't want to do this study. If you don't want to be in this study, you just have to tell me. It's up to you.
- You can also take more time to think about being in the study and tell me what you decide later.

**What if you have any questions?**

- You can ask any questions that you may have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, either you can email or have your parents email Ms. Krahn at [mandy.krahn@ualberta.ca](mailto:mandy.krahn@ualberta.ca).
- You can also take more time to think about being in the study and also talk some more with your parents about being in the study.

**What choices do you have if you say no to this study?**

- This study is extra to regular schoolwork, so you will miss some class to be part of it. You will have to do extra homework to catch up for the work you missed in class. If you don't want to be part of this study, you will just continue on in class as usual.

**Other information about the study:**

- If you decide to be in the study, please circle 'yes' and write your name below.
- You can change your mind and stop being part of it at any time up until two weeks after your interview. All you have to do is tell the person in charge. It's okay. The researcher and your parents won't be upset. Each week Ms. Krahn will ask you in person if you wish to continue on with the study.
- You will be given a copy of this paper to keep.

Yes, I will be in this research study.      No, I don't want to do this.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's name

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature of the child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date