"A beautiful little school"

A HOLISTIC AND CRITICAL NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF ONE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

by

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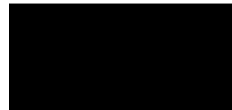
March 17, 2022	Dr. Blaine Hatt	
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to the creators of my first school. I am inspired by their bold tenacity and commitment to new ways of learning and living together, which continues to push my thinking and challenge my assumptions, this many years later. Thank you.

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Thank you to the creators of the school, who worked to establish something very different for their children. Thank you to all participants—both former teachers and former students who generously shared their recollections and stories. I keep returning to the voices of participants, as I want to centre their experiences, their stories. We will hear a lot from them throughout this dissertation. Their reminiscences bring forward the past and make the learning new again, especially during the course of the last 2 years—the renewal of the ways of living and learning together, though they took place 4 decades ago, are more relevant than ever.

I especially want to thank my children, Forest and Grace, who continue to encourage, support, and cheer me on, no matter what. Every single day, they inspire me to become a better person. Thank you.

Chapter One—Introduction, Prologue to the Story

> I remember the cornbread and the salads . . . making salad . . . go to the garden and pick things, but there were also weeds all around the garden that we'd pick just as much as anything in the garden.
>
> —Former Community School Student

In this dissertation, I construct a history of the alternative Community School that I attended as a young child and share the narratives of participants. The story will be full of contradictions and complexities, as are all real human stories. Adding the autoethnographic layer of *my* experiences in that school as a child, and looking back now as a mainstream educator and as a researcher, the complexities and contradictions create an intricate web. I invite you, the reader, to join me in following threads of multiple understandings and multiple truths.

My mother was diagnosed, in the winter of 2016, with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. It was a sucker punch for my sister and me, since we had lost our father to cancer four months earlier. My father was the best person to have around in crisis—he became the calm in the storm—and guided me through many difficult times, including showing how, in his final days, to live without regret.

"It's not good timing," my mom said—wishing she could save us from the pain of another loss so quickly on the heels of our father's death. She was the strongest woman I knew, and taught me everything I needed to know about being strong—and about not being afraid of the word *feminist* or much of anything else, for that matter.

This critical and holistic narrative inquiry will explore the experiences and recollections of adults and children involved in the Community School in the 1970s and 80s along with my

own story, which will be viewed through an autoethnographic lens. The exploration of researchers' own stories can complement the stories of other participants, making sense of the universal themes of love and death, grief, and joy. Researchers write through their experiences of grief, in turn receiving the gift of self-realization and growth. "We write to disrupt the silence around expectations of grief and loss and illustrate how these emotions can still constitute many of our mundane experiences years and even decades after losing people we love" (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 29). In grieving the loss of my parents, I had lost sight of the waypoints for my understanding of nurturing and nourishment. This dissertation became a path through which I found my way back to my core and whole self, reigniting my passions for life and for learning.

This chapter's opening quotation captures a memory from the school at the core of this research. As metaphors go, I cannot conjure one that illustrates the complexities of intentionality and opportunity this well. Children live and learn in both the tended and the wild harvested gardens. It has become increasingly clear to me that we limit children—and ourselves—when we see nourishment only in that intentionally planted and tended garden, rather than also seeing it in the wild harvest, which is offered without plans, without direction, without three-part lessons.

As an adult, when I see lambs quarters or common purslane propagating in the yard, I am brought back to memories of gathering them in the fields of my childhood. In the telling of stories, I hope to provide a sense of how the learning in that ephemeral school was not about a *teachable* moment; it was a confluence of *learning* moments, sown together by lambs quarters and common purslane. Let's get started!

The educators in the Community School were also parents of the children who attended. Parent-teachers were not required to be qualified teachers; however, they were expected to commit to the collaborative project of the running of the school. With school location rotating between family homes, the host family was responsible for organizing and/or providing teaching at their home. The school community was made up of entire families who joined the school, not only the students who would learn together. My mother, who had a background as a writer, was one of those parent-teachers,. With this dual role, she wrote several articles throughout the operation of the school. The excerpt below was written to capture the kind of learning that took place in the Community School, in order to share the experiences of some few students with a wider audience.

> *Listen in on a spontaneous seminar where the teaching tools are the reading readiness books used in the public school system. The task is to join the pictured object to the person who uses it: Apparently the hair ribbon to the little girl, the hammer to the little boy. Only the parent-teacher is getting it right. The students are puzzled. "My dad ties his hair back with a ribbon," Max says, "so the ribbon must belong to both of them." "Anybody can use a hammer," somebody says positively. And one by one they leave, apparently convinced the whole thing is a waste of time. The only person who learns a lesson in sexism is the parent-teacher.* (Poff, 1979, p. 44, emphasis in original)

Some forty-plus years later, I am revisiting my mother's goal as I look towards sharing the alternative learning experiences of some few students with a broader audience of learners and educators.

Research Questions

I was a student in a community/free school in the 1970s, which was alternative in many ways. The Community School ran in a rural community from 1969 into the 1980s. The number of students ranged from 5 at its inception to nearly 20, with the population of the school fluctuating as families came and left the school community. Students ranged in age from 3 to 13.

I interviewed eleven former students and teachers with an aim to gather their stories and to document peoples' recollections about what life was like for them in that Community School, and to consider how they feel about those experiences in hindsight. With approval from the University Research Ethics Board, I invited participants to choose to use their own names or to use pseudonyms. Every participant opted to use their real name and I have not disguised the name of the school. The stories of the school community are the real stories of their lived experiences. These are the kinds of questions/musings I set out to explore:

1. I asked participants, how they think/feel about the school experience looking back.
2. From a holistic perspective, I wondered how the Community School experience affected participants—whether as students or as teachers, both then and now.
3. I explored participants' experiences through the holistic concepts of mind, body, spirit, and emotions, aiming to create a balanced view of experiences within the school and amongst its community members.
4. From a critical perspective, I asked what impact notions of freedom, oppression, voice, and empowerment had on the creation and operation of the school.
5. This research explored why parents and students came to be involved in the Community School in the first place. If participants chose to leave, or return to, mainstream schooling, I asked why they make that decision?

6. I am interested in what motivated parents to make the bold decision to take their children out of conventional school and enter an experimental and untested learning environment. If they did not enter/re-enter mainstream schooling, I asked them why they stayed in the community school?
7. As a mainstream educator, I wanted to explore different ways of teaching and learning. I wondered: Can I learn about kinder, gentler ways to teach and work with children in schools?

For a complete list of interview questions, see Appendix A. For an outline of participant roles, see Appendix B.

Purpose of the Study

Mainstream schooling is very different from the schooling offered in alternative school formats, such as in the Community School at the centre of this study. This research aims a spotlight on different ways of knowing, by exploring the learning in that particular school environment. By sharing my story and that of my fellow Community Schoolers, in a particular space, at a particular time, I am sharing the exploration/recollection of one schooling experience, and how it relates to the existing literature.

Holman Jones et al. (2013) assert that "the stories we tell enable us to live *better*; stories allow us to lead more reflective, more meaningful and more just lives" (p. 1). Narrative becomes the vehicle with which to explore the particular space and place of the school, aiming to capture the subtleties and complexities of participants' experiences. Former parent-teachers and students participated in open-ended, dialogic interviews, sharing their memories, stories, and experiences. Additionally, artifacts were used as provocations for participants' memories as well as for gaining information about the school community.

In the case of this project, where I am both a researcher and member of the community, I collaborated with participants, upsetting the traditional researcher-participant dynamic. I have long-term, personal relationships with the participants, many of whom came to be involved in the Community School out of their own (or their parents') frustration with mainstream schooling.

Participants are aware that I now work as an elementary-school principal, raising questions about my feelings about the Community School. More than one participant has asked me about how *I* feel now about the experience, given that I have a career in the public-school system. These multiple roles create a complex relationship among this research, the researcher, and the participants.

When reflecting upon her involvement in the Community School, one former parent-teacher demonstrated her awareness of this underlying tension between researcher and research. As one of the parent-teachers shared, there was "lots of anti-school sentiment during that time. No offence intended."

It is clear that she was concerned about my perception of her expressed anti-school sentiment and did not wish to hurt my feelings. I do not want my roles—as a former student, as a current educator, and as an academic researcher—to silence participant voices. I am, of course, not alone in my self-reflection about the importance of power relationships in the interview process. This awareness is a primary goal of narrative research. Kim (2016) states,

> Before we conduct our interview, some critical questions we want to ask ourselves are: Whose interests are going to be served by the asymmetry of power between my interviewee and me? . . . If our goal is to let stories be told (and it should be), then giving up the power as an interviewer and empowering our storyteller instead is natural. (Kim, 2016, p 166)

My goal *is* to let the myriad stories of the Community School be told, and in order to do so, I need to be constantly aware of any roadblocks that may be put in the way—by me or by others. I used interviews to explore our shared experiences, as well as those experiences and memories that diverge from my own and those of other participants. Narrative became a vehicle with which to explore participant experiences in an attempt to capture this particular learning experience.

Limitations

By sharing my story, and those of my fellow Community Schoolers, in a particular space, at a particular time, I am sharing the exploration/recollection of one schooling experience, and how it relates to existing literature. It is not my intention for this story to be generalizable, nor will it necessarily be reflective of the broader alternative-schooling community. I will leave it to the reader to decide if they see themes connecting more broadly to their own educational experiences, whether as a child/student or adult/teacher. It is my hope that more in-depth, critical, and holistic schooling narratives will continue to be shared, adding to the personal narrative literature.

Theoretical Framework—Holistic and Critical

The recollected reading-seminar story shared above was published in *Natural Life* (1979) magazine, in an article written by my late mother, describing a typical day in school. As was the school, the article is reflective of key tenets of holistic and critical pedagogy. It is holistic ("*That seminar took place on the grass under an elm tree*"); it is critical ("*The only person who learns a lesson in sexism is the parent-teacher"*); and it is respectful of the importance of self-determined learning ("*And one by one they leave, apparently convinced the whole thing is a waste of time"*;

Poff, p. 44). *Natural Life* magazine, founded in 1976, has been a popular resource for free schoolers, homeschoolers, and unschoolers alike, especially throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Educational Sustainability

The three pillars of sustainable development have been identified by UNESCO (2005) as environmental, social, and economic; education is seen as the "motor for change" (UNESCO, 2005). This research project is embedded in my understanding of educational sustainability and is connected with these three pillars. Holistic pedagogy is connected with the environmental pillar, interested in mind, body, spirit, and emotions, including relationships with one another and with our environment. Members of the school community were interested in connecting with all aspects of the learner and connecting with, and better understanding, their environment. Critical pedagogy is connected with the social-justice pillar—the school was driven by a social-justice orientation, working to meet the needs of all children through the creation of a different kind of learning environment. In all aspects of the school, organizers were cognizant of moving away from a consumerist society and focusing on sustainable social, environmental, and economic choices. Parents funded the school out of pocket, and economic choices remained at the centre of decisions.

> And money—or lack of it—is a problem. No government, no private foundation subsidizes the Killaloe Community School. Money to buy books, teaching supplies, pencils and paper and field trips all come from parents, most of whom are already living well below the national poverty line . . . What money is available is put into things like a film projector. Most of the children come from homes without television and film is an exciting, easy-to-use teaching tool. (Poff, 1979, p. 46)

Present Day, the Kids Are Not Alright

I work today as a principal in a mainstream elementary school, where I continue to find pervasive themes of surveillance and vigilance. Students are in my office on a near-daily basis, with stress, anxiety, and the inexperience and inability to manage daily stressors, conflict, and risk. This surveillance is juxtaposed with my experiences of freedom and trust which were placed upon the children in the Community School.

Supporters of the idea of a growth mindset assert that it is in making mistakes that we learn (Boaler, 2016; Duckworth, 2017; Dweck, 2008), and I wholeheartedly agree. I believe, however, that we are making a grave mistake if we think that a lesson is best learned only in the language and mathematics classroom and not also on the playground, in the lunchroom, and everywhere else kids find themselves playing, learning, and living. It is well documented that recess is important in schools, and that unstructured or undirected play is essential for healthy brain development in children (Thalken et al., 2021). However, the pressure in mainstream schools to focus on academic achievement has resulted in pressures on schools to reduce or eliminate recess time (Ramstetter et al., 2010).

My anecdotal observations about the well-being of students are reflected in mainstream media and research as well. For example, between 2015 and 2018 *The Globe and Mail* published a series focused on improving mental-health research, diagnosis, and treatment for children, in which a typical headline reads, "One-third of Ontario adolescents report 'psychological distress,' survey finds" (Brait, July 21, 2016). Another headline decries, "Anxiety the leading mental health issue among Canadian children" (CBC News, Feb 04, 2016). This CBC article raises the concern that "school policies like fire drills and code red drills could also be contributing to the anxiety and the idea that the world is dangerous" (CBC News, 2016, para

4). Longitudinal research conducted by The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH; 2016) indicates that 1 in 6 students in Ontario rate their mental health as fair or poor, a significant increase since 2007 (Boak et al., 2016, p. iv).

Back to School Means Back to Stress

Research has demonstrated that increases in stress and anxiety can be connected directly to school, where, during the school year, students report higher anxiety levels than during holidays (Gray, 2020). Suicide-attempt rates are reported to be higher on instructional days than on non-instructional days (Cheung, 2020), and Dr. Tyler Black (2020) reports seeing fewer children in psychiatric crisis during non-school times. According to Black, it is important to recognize that schools themselves are a source of stress. Younger children also show indicators of stress related to their schooling experiences. For example, “hair cortisol level (a measure of chronic stress) was significantly higher in children two months after they started kindergarten compared to two months before they started” (Gray, 2020). Peter Gray’s (2013) research further points to the role of mainstream schooling in increasing children’s anxiety, while decreasing their self-determination:

> In the name of education, we have increasingly deprived children of the time and freedom they need to educate themselves through their own means. And in the name of safety, we have deprived children of the freedom they need to develop the understanding, courage, and confidence required to face life’s dangers and challenges with equanimity. (p. 19)

It is clear that our children are struggling. While it may be unclear how much mainstream schooling is the cause of increased anxiety and stress, I am driven to explore ways that we can serve kids better. I grapple with these issues as I continue to work in mainstream education. This

disconnect—between my philosophy of living and learning and what I see transpiring everyday—challenged me to look back over my own educational experiences and ask: Is there another way? Am I an intended reformer or a conscientious objector to mainstream schooling? Or, more to the point, can I be both?

Chapter Two: Alternative Schools

Figure 1

Students and Teachers at Community School.

Note: Author is 4th from the right. This photo was published in *Natural Life Magazine* along with an article written by my mother (extreme left), which chronicled life in the school. My father (extreme right) took the photo with the use of a timer. Family photo, reprinted with permission.

Former music teacher at the First Street School (featured in *The Lives of Children*) and architect of the Community School, Barney McCaffrey, submitted his reflections about the Community School to *Growing Without Schooling* in 1979. This excerpt shares the tone and quality of daily learning, capturing the opportunities of learning, which were valued over the structure of standardized curriculum.

> Last year we realized that once a week with arithmetic just wasn't enough, so now it is taught almost every day. Quite often, after the regular subjects (or sometimes in place of them), special subjects are carried out—a Tai Chi demonstration from a visitor, or a series of lessons in French, or archery, or meditation, or eurythmie, or pony vaulting, or wood working from a visiting volunteer. (as cited in Farenga 2011, p. 8)

The Free School Movement

Organizing/originating members of the Killaloe Community School came from urban environments as a part of the back-to-the-land movement. Upon arrival to the rural area, many of these new residents, often referred to as "newcomers," found each other and joined in the development of the Community School, known colloquially by some as Barney's School. Many came together with a common philosophy and sensibility. They used their growing knowledge of alternative schools, which prioritized freedom, choice, and student-centred learning. Coming from the politicized environment of the 1960s, they were sharing the knowledge they gained from Ivan Illich, A.S. Neil, John Holt, and others to explore new ways of learning with their children. The school was sometimes called the free school, but was more frequently referred to by the school's creators as the Community School, which was also its official name. Regardless of its name, the school's creators were motivated by the political environment of the 1960s and was closely connected to the free-school movement at the time.

Ron Miller (2002), in his influential history of the free-school movement in North America, recognized the political movement out of which free schools developed.

> The Free School movement was not simply a body of educational techniques but a radical response to troubling feelings of disillusionment and alienation. . . . The radical critics were not concerned with improving schools or bolstering student achievement; rather, their writings reflected a deeply felt sense that the established system of schooling as such was an oppressive institution that thwarted young people's social, emotional, moral, and even intellectual development. (p. 39)

In this chapter, I will explore the history of the free-school movement along with some of the activists and writers who influenced that movement. While the community was not created in

a vacuum, the parent-teachers' awareness of the free and alternative school movement varied from person to person.

I begin by exploring the literature of the 1970s, including the work of A. S. Neill, Emmett Hall, L. A. Dennis, Ivan Illich, and John Holt, as these are some of the authors the parent-teachers whom I interviewed for my study were reading at the time. One parent-teacher indicated she had read Ivan Illich's (1971) *Deschooling Society* and the Hall-Dennis Report (Hall & Dennis, 1968), and spoke of Montessori and Waldorf influences and of being politicized in university. Another referred to reading *Summerhill* (Neill, 1968) as a teenager. Yet another indicated that any reading on the topic, for her at least, was an afterthought. She shared, "To be fair, that might just be me. We [back-to-the-landers] were part of a movement, and we did not know we were until it was given a name later. It is possible our school was like that, too" (Parent-teacher, Sylvia).

The Influence of John Holt

Along with George Dennison and Jonathan Kozol, John Holt became one of the most outspoken advocates against the status quo in mainstream schooling. Holt began his career as a mainstream teacher and challenged schools to do better for the children within them. Later, Holt would begin to question if schools could meet the needs of children at all—ultimately arguing that schools, whether mainstream, progressive, or alternative, can never meet the needs of the children who attend them. He argued that whether children are coerced gently or brutally, they remain coerced—and as such, schools cannot meet the needs of children. In an interview in 1981, Holt said, "It's not that I feel that school is a good idea gone wrong," he wrote, "but a wrong idea from the word go. It's a nutty notion that we can have a place where nothing but learning happens, cut off from the rest of life" (as cited in Frauenfelder, 2011, p. 201)

In *Freedom and Beyond* (1972), Holt outlines his understanding of differences between freedom and permissiveness. When he talks about freedom, it is not about life without limits or without structure. What he means by freedom is "More Choice, Less Fear" (Holt, 1972, p. 11).

Holt argues that children do not have any illusions about the power and control that adults wield over them. In Holt's (1972) estimation, most children are relatively accepting of this relationship—as long as they are treated without tyranny. Often, when the structures are clear, and kids know what they will and will not get in trouble for, they accept the structure. "Most of the quarrels between adults and children that I see are needlessly provoked by the adults for no other reason than to prove what the child never for a minute doubts, that they are Boss" (p. 29). For Holt, the lack of choice, the lack of trust, and the lack of freedom are unacceptable prices for children to pay in school.

The First Street School

Holt echoes George Dennison's understanding of the natural authority of adults. For Dennison and Holt, the authority of adults should come from experience, not from power. Here, Dennison and Holt again find a common language and understanding of freedom and authority, along with the importance of respecting and trusting children. In the foreword to *How Children Learn*, Holt (2017) writes, "All I am saying in this book can be summed up in two words—Trust Children. Nothing could be more simple—or more difficult" (p. xii).

In order to be able to trust children, Holt (2017) asserts, we must first trust ourselves. This goes against everything that most of us were taught as children (p. xii). We need first to begin to trust ourselves, to re-build self-trust. We need to look at ourselves with compassion and gentleness—and trust that our authentic selves are good enough. Without that, how can we help children build their own self-compassion and kindness?

In the opening of George Dennison's (1969) *The Lives of Children*, Holt wrote that it was "the most perceptive, moving, and important book on education" that he had ever read or expected to read (as cited in Dennison, 1969, p. 1). Dennison worked as a teacher in the First Street School, which his wife founded, and where he purposefully did things very differently.

> The really crucial things at First Street (School) were these: that we eliminated—to the best of our ability—the obstacles which impede the natural growth of mind; that we based everything on reality of encounter between teacher and child; and that we did what we could (not enough, by far) to restore something of the continuum of experience within which every child must achieve his growth. It is not remarkable that under these circumstances the children came to life. They had been terribly bored, after all, by the experience of failure. For books are interesting, numbers are, and painting, and facts about the world. (Dennison, 1969, p.1)

From the outset of this research, I had been looking for ways to connect the dots between my lived experiences as a young girl in the Community School and the theoretical perspectives I had read about in preparation for interviews with former teachers and students in the school. When I read the words of John Holt, Ivan Illich, A. S. Neill, Ron Miller, and George Dennison, I felt as though I were reading words kindred to the organizers of my early schooling experiences. Imagine my surprise and delight when I discovered that Barney, architect of *my* first school, the school under study here, had not only read these writers but had also worked with George Dennison (1969) at *the* First Street School, featured in *The Lives of Children*. "Barney, the folk singer, came today, as he does regularly three times a week, with his guitar and autoharp. It was a marvelous session and the best possible demonstration of what the freedom in the school is all about" (Dennison, 1969, p. 31). No wonder the words of Dennison, Holt, and others feel like

family. In many ways, they were the people I was raised with. *Lives of Children*—that just felt like home.

For some, the movement was political—and an effort to offer an alternative to mainstream schooling for their children. This is in keeping with the free-school movement with its larger goal of societal reform. "Free School ideology was explicitly counter-cultural and sought to replace the existing institutions of modern society with a radically decentralized, personalistic, communal form of society" (Miller, 2002, p. 131). As we will see, the Community School was a part of a counter-cultural movement, born out of the political ideology of the families involved.

Looking Back—The Deeply Personal and Deeply Political

As a child, I did not question the reasons behind my parents' decision to participate in the Community School themselves (as educators), or to enrol my sister and I in the school instead of the local public school. Like some of the other children, I grumbled when the snow was deep and drifting as we walked up the long driveways; I embraced horseback riding lessons (bareback and trick riding), and I circumvented the meditation sessions by reading the hidden comic books.

Unlike some of the older students, I was not uncomfortable with the mandatory, teacher-planned, nude yoga lessons; I enjoyed the challenge of gathering edible wild plants for lunch. The shared open-concept accommodations of mattresses laid out on the floor were comfortable for me, as I felt safe and protected, surrounded by the older children in the school. I did not understand why some of them built elaborate tent rooms, and why they did not let all the little kids, like me, snuggle in with them when it was cold. I did not question anything about school; it was just life.

In an article written by my mother, sharing a day in the life of the school, one of the older children was quoted asking, “Why can’t we have subjects like they do in real school?” (Poff, 1979, p. 45). As a young child, I did not wonder what “real school” meant, nor did I wonder why I was not attending school there instead. Now, as an adult, a feminist, an educator, and a critical pedagogue, I am fascinated by the bold choices made by my parents, and other adults, in creating an alternative school option for their children. I am a little late to the party, but I am ready for the adventure.

I am hopeful that through the work of A.S. Neill, Ivan Illich, John Holt, Hall and Dennis, and others, I will gain some perspective about the environment during the time that the school was established and functioning.

Becoming a Teacher

When I embarked upon a career as a mainstream schoolteacher, it was with considerable trepidation. My parents’ choices for my early schooling were evident to me. They were acting against a teacher-directed, hierarchical power structure, in favour of a child-centred, self-determined, and empowering form of learning. They saw mainstream schooling as a purveyor of ideological hegemony.

As I was becoming a teacher, my mother challenged me to understand why it is that some people get to hold the privileged role of gatekeeper in the transaction of education. She challenged me to interrupt the hegemonic process—to wake up to the oppressive nature of the mainstream schooling system. I can hear my mother’s voice in Illich’s (1971) words: “School teachers and ministers are the only professionals who feel entitled to pry into the private affairs of their clients at the same time as they preach to a captive audience” (p. 31). The tentacles of teacher power reach into every corner of a child’s life, and regardless of how they choose to

employ that power, teachers have control over the students in their classrooms. I expect that my mother would agree with Ricci (2010) that "children are among the last acceptably oppressed groups" (p. 344). Whether they do it with kindness or with fear, the control teachers exert over children remains.

My story is deeply political and personal. My parents were deeply connected to my early learning—and helped to inform my thinking around education for my professional life as well. I began my Ph.D. shortly after both of my parents' passing; it was no coincidence that I would choose to dig deeply into my personal stories—deeply and inextricably linked to my political ones—in my drive to challenge and push my own work in mainstream education. I imagine my mother would have been equal parts pleased and troubled by my choice. Pleased, because I was finally open to her understanding of the injustices of mainstream education. Troubled, because of the inevitable impacts on my life. I recall telling her about my plan to begin an undergraduate program in women's studies. As an overtly political feminist, she cautioned me against that path—*it will ruin your life—you can't unknow what you will learn. Be sure you want your worldview to be changed irreversibly.* Looking back, I wonder how she could have not known that by age 18, growing up with her as my mother, my eyes were already open to inequity, social justice, and a feminist worldview?

Later, once my career as a teacher was well-established, after one of our many heated conversations about the hegemonic nature of my career choice, she told me she was proud of me and that she would rather have me teaching children in mainstream education, making change from within, earning a professional wage (and a pension), than teaching children under a tree for free; I was shocked. I learned under that tree, taught by my mom and by other teachers, for free. By that time, however, she was looking ahead to economic stability for her grandchildren.

Nonetheless, her political and philosophical convictions remain embedded in my worldview. My parents both lived their philosophy throughout their lives, which did not include traditional careers or pensions; however, they lived with the consistency of their values. I continue to struggle with my own internal inconsistency, personally and professionally, as I ask myself, Am I living what I believe?

Parent-teachers in the school were motivated by what they were reading and learning, whether in their university or in their communities, to become involved in the Community School. Bernadine, who became increasingly politicized as a university student, did not feel mainstream school was in keeping with her political beliefs. For her, the choice to put her daughters in the Community School was an easy one.

> There was a lot of talk while I was still at university about free schools and just letting kids learn, rather than forcing them to sit at desks all day long. That concept really appealed to me. [Later, when we had our own children and were looking at school options] . . . we only knew that there was a free school and that it was known as "Barney's School."
>
> We did know that Barney was an unconventional character, to put it mildly, but that didn't scare us. As politically aware students, education was one of the issues we were concerned about. Further Googling reminds me of the Hall–Dennis Report. I have a vague recollection of being disappointed that it was not as radical as I had thought.

While criticizing aspects of mainstream schooling, the report did not go so far as to suggest the dismantling of the school system. While the changes suggested by Hall and Dennis were broad, they did not call for fundamental change to the mainstream system.

The Hall–Dennis Report

The Hall–Dennis Report (1968), officially titled *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*, was authored by Justice Emmett Hall of the Supreme Court of Canada and Mr. A. Dennis, a former school principal. The report was commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1965, with the instructions "'to set forth the aims of education for the educational system of the Province' and to propose means by which these aims might be achieved" (Hall & Dennis, 1968, n.p.). The report recommended sweeping changes to Ontario's education system, which was seen to be out of date.

> Today, on every side . . . there is heard a growing demand for a fresh look at education in Ontario. The Committee was told of inflexible programs, outdated curricula, unrealistic regulations, regimented organization, and mistaken aims of education. We heard from alienated students, frustrated teachers, irate parents, and concerned educators. Many public organizations and private individuals have told us of their growing discontent and lack of confidence in a school system, which, in their opinion, has become outmoded and is failing those it exists to serve. (Hall & Dennis, 1968, n.p.)

The authors of the Hall-Dennis Report challenged readers to rethink how children were viewed in the education system, to see them as people and as members of society (Hall & Dennis, 1968), and to prepare them for their futures in Ontario.

> The needs of the child are simply stated. Each and every one has the right to learn, to play, to laugh, to dream, to love, to dissent, to reach upward, and to be himself. Our children need to be treated as human beings—exquisite, complex, and elegant in their diversity. (Hall & Dennis, 1968, n.p.)

Hall and Dennis (1968) recommended significant change for the education system, but these changes were envisioned within the mainstream schooling system. Parent-teachers involved in the Community School would agree, I expect, with a reframing of how society saw children. However, they saw the path forward as existing outside of the mainstream—outside of mainstream school and culture. According to Sylvia, one of the parent-teachers interviewed, one goal of the Community School was to avoid the indoctrination of mainstream schooling. These parent-teachers would find commonality with Ivan Illich's (1971) understanding that schools are designed based "on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly successions; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets" (p. 76). The Killaloe Community School was shaped with similar assumptions. According to my mother, the school was built on an understanding that learning is no secret nor is it the property of a special group. As she wrote, "'The kids should realize you can learn any place, any time,' somebody insisted back in 1969 and that idea has stuck" (Poff, 1979, p. 44).

Ivan Illich saw a sweeping change in learning as inevitable, but he did not see any possibility for that change to occur within obligatory schooling. A. S. Neill also saw the need for broad educational reform. However, he worked to manifest that change within the alternative school he founded, the Summerhill Free School. Hall and Dennis, who were also advocating for change, explored how Ontario's schooling could be transformed from within. The parents of the Killaloe Community School drew from this medley of ideas in the creation of the school, which was an alternative to the mainstream.

Summerhill Influences

Unlike Illich, Neill (1968) saw educational reform as possible within a school environment. Neill established Summerhill Free School based on the belief that children are inherently wise and realistic: “We set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves” (p. 14). Decision making at Summerhill was then, and still is now, democratic. Children have as much say, through a democratic vote, as any adult (p. 17). This does not mean that all of the decisions were the ones Neill would have made himself, but he asserts that he stayed true to the principle of democracy. Neill shared one particularly colourful story:

> I once brought forward a motion that swearing be abolished by law, and I gave my reason. I had been showing a woman around with her little boy, a prospective pupil. Suddenly from upstairs came a very strong adjective. The mother hastily gathered up her son and went off in a hurry. “Why,” I asked at a meeting, “should my income suffer because some fathead swears in front of a prospective parent? It isn’t a moral question at all; it is purely financial. You swear and I lose a pupil.” (p. 41)

Neill lost the vote and his motion did not pass. While decision-making at the Killaloe Community School was not formally democratic, children’s right to autonomy was at the core of decisions. A similar scenario played out with the students and parents at the school, in regards to appropriate language:

> Someone points out the children's language is appalling. Six and seven year-olds are using four-letter words that would bring a blush to Pierre Trudeau’s cheeks. Two parents adamantly refuse to allow “language control” and the matter is left. Slowly the children

> discover they are alienating people with their choice of vocabulary and four-letter words become rarer though definitely not extinct. (Poff, 1979, p. 46)

In my mother's writing, I hear echoes of Neill's (1968) belief that "a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing" (p. 14). While the process of decision-making was kept in the hands of the adults, in the Community School, the autonomy of the children remained protected.

For Illich (1971), it was not enough to rethink school. Illich felt that nothing short of the elimination of school could reform learning. "Universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be no more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools" (p. ix). Further, cautioned Illich, "the free-school movement entices unconventional educator, but ultimately does so in support of the conventional ideology of schooling" (Illich, 1971, p. 65). The originators of the Community School did create a school; however, it was not a conventional school, and, more in keeping with Illich's beliefs, it was a part of a larger movement pushing for change.

Parent-teacher Sylvia reflects on how the back-to-the-land movement was driven by a strong desire for social change. She said:

> Everyone was reading various materials on alternative schools. We were more interested in not allowing our children to be indoctrinated by a system we were attempting to escape by coming here [as a part of the back-to-the-land movement].

The parent-teachers were pushing for sweeping change in all aspects of their lives. They did not want their children's learning to be cut off from the rest of their lives.

The Hall–Dennis Report and A. S. Neill's work in Summerhill both advocate for sweeping educational reform, as does Illich's work. However, Hall, Dennis, and Neill's call for

change came within the confines of mainstream schooling. Holt's position would ultimately come to mirror Illich's belief that compulsory schooling is inherently oppressive.

Illich and Holt saw the potential for change in learning in the destruction of obligatory schooling. A. S. Neill aimed to create opportunities for change with the children he worked with through Summerhill. The Hall–Dennis Report was seen by at least one of the originators of the Community School as not being radical enough. While it advocated for change, it explored how Ontario's schooling could be transformed from within.

Free Schools

Not all critics of public education were supporters of alternative/free schools. Like Illich and Holt, some felt that replacing one kind of school with another would not solve the problems created by mainstream schooling. For example, Jonathan Kozol (1972) was explicit in his critique of free schools. He argued that "it is as much an error to say that learning is never the consequence of teaching as it is to imagine that it always is. The second error belongs most often to the public schools; the first to many of the Free Schools" (p. 33). Kozol argued that attending free school in the country is no more than "running away to a 'moral vacuum'" (p. 10). Kozol's critique raises big questions regarding how to make change. Does society change from within, by individuals claiming their autonomy, or does it come from social movements? These questions encouraged me to think about my research in new ways. I wondered: What were the intentions of the teachers? What were the outcomes for the children who attended the school? Will changes to education come from the children and adults who continued to push their own political agendas? It was clear from interviews that these parents were looking for more than an escape into a moral vacuum. But, I am getting ahead of myself.

Kozol insisted that free schoolers were lacking a social conscience. However, free schooling was by no means a coherent movement. George Dennison might take exception to Kozol's assumption that free schoolers' opinion of teachers and teaching represented a monolithic belief. Dennison believed that children benefited and grew from an adult's "natural authority." Kozol felt that individuals could not make a difference on their own, and he asserted that free schoolers were not working towards social change. Many did want (I believe) to impact social change, as outlined in the goals of the participants quoted throughout this chapter.

Making It Relevant

The free or Community School that is at the centre of this research ceased operations more than 40 years ago. However, educators and students continue to challenge mainstream schooling by living and learning today in a variety of alternative ways, challenging assumptions and limitations of mainstream schooling. From Kenneth Danford's (2019) work with North Star and his efforts to offer a "viable and inspiring alternative to attending school" (p. 9), to current supporters of Summerhill and the Sudbury Valley School, unschoolers and homeschoolers are looking for and creating alternatives, both within and outside of formal schools. Danford acknowledges the depth and breadth of writing by activists, academics, and educators working on these topics:

> When I set out to write a book, I did not want to add to the "What's wrong with schools and how to fix them" genre. This genre dates back over a century, to John Dewey, Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, and a bookstore-worth more, in the past couple of decades. I do share my own process of disillusionment, from being a successful student to an idealistic teacher to an intended reformer to a conscientious objector. (Danford, 2019, p. 17)

In a similar vein, I do not want to add to the "Why are kids so stressed out" genre, exploring the high levels of stress and anxiety faced by children who struggle through mainstream schooling and attempt to over-achieve and live through the high expectations placed on them—by their parents, their teachers, themselves. I am keen to explore the need for play and the embracing of trust—the desire by educators to allow children to participate in risky-play and trust them to make their own decisions. Much has been written about this lack of trust placed in children by a variety of writers and researchers such as Peter Gray and Alison Gropnik.

I would love to explore this lack of trust and more, and it is a large part of what inspired me to undertake this research in the first place. Yet I am challenged by the restrictions of time and of space and must choose one path. Yes, kids are stressed. Yes, kids are pulled in different directions. Yes, they need opportunities to explore, to be trusted, to learn mindfulness, and how to inquire and to think critically. However, this is outside of the scope of this research. I must choose a path for this research, and those questions will wait for another time. In this study, I explore other ways of learning and knowing together within this particular community/free school.

Chapter Three: Holistic Theory

Barney McCaffrey, one of the key architects and founders of the Community School, lived by the motto "live simply, so others can simply live." This aphorism is variously attributed to the Quaker faith, Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and others; however, as a child, I first learned the phrase from Barney.

Interconnectedness, freedom, wholeness, and simplicity, were key concepts in McCaffrey's philosophy and in the creation of the school. This belief harkens back to the work of writers such as Henry David Thoreau who, in 1854 asked "Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed as birds universally sing when they are so engaged" (2000, p. 43).

Entire dissertations could be, and have been, devoted to any one of the individual thinkers explored in this chapter. Many more pioneering educators could be included in an exploration of holistically oriented thinking. The selections and contributions come from the influences on my experiences and influences on those who designed my early learning at the Community School.

I have not attempted to create a new model or framework of holistic education, as there are many to choose from that are both eloquent and cohesive. It is from this rich tradition and understanding that I draw my inspiration of holistic thought. For the purposes of this research, I see strength in the simplicity in the principles of interconnectedness, sacredness, and wholeness as identified by John Miller in conversation with Four Arrows (Four Arrows & Miller, 2013). To this, I would add the importance of freedom and simplicity influences on and by Barney McCaffrey. Thus, my working understanding of holistic education may be distilled to the umbrella principles of interconnectedness, sacredness, wholeness, freedom, and simplicity.

Forgive any omissions and view this chapter as a sampling of the thinkers who have influenced, and continue to influence, my very personal paradigm.

Holistic Education

Discussion of "holistic" learning came to be used in the field of education in the 1970s and 1980s (Novak, 2019). Definitions of holism and holistic learning have evolved over time and, while the term's use in education may be relatively new, the concepts on which holistic education is built can be traced through a variety of paths, over a very long period of time.

The term *holism* was coined in the 1920s by Jan Christian Smuts and derived from the Greek *holos*. Smuts postulated holism as the "fundamental factor operative towards the creation of wholes in the universe" (1927, p. 88). Smuts viewed the universe as a whole, rather than as independent, discrete, unrelated parts. In *Holism and Evolution,* Smuts (1927) says*:* "this whole-making or holistic tendency is fundamental in nature that it has a well-marked ascertainable character, and that Evolution is nothing but the gradual development of progressive series of wholes" (p. ix). Smuts's understanding centred on his belief that everything in the universe is connected and that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Gestalt Theory), whether it be physical, biological, or social. With Smuts in mind, we begin to see that the entire universe can best be understood when all parts are seen as connected, as a part of that greater whole. This interconnectedness can be seen in modern understandings of holistic education; however, Smuts's work is often overlooked when exploring the history of holistic education.

This understanding of the whole as greater than the sum of its parts is reflected in the work of many holistically inspired thinkers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson (2000) who, writing in 1836, saw the whole found everywhere in nature. "Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the

whole" (p. 22). In this chapter, I explore some of the pioneers and architects of holistic learning, making connections across schools of thought and centuries of thinking, in an aim to draw them together into an intricate, complex, and eclectic whole.

What Is Holistic Education?

While there are many definitions of holistic education, writers and researchers continue to work to find common threads and themes. There have been goals, lists, and principles outlining what it means to be holistic, which can be as varied as the definitions themselves. One may be tempted to try to find all of the components of holistic theory and itemize them, so we can finally nail down what makes learning holistic. Both Ron Miller and Jack Miller are frequently cited for their work with holistic education, having been called the "two bright angelic Millers" (Novak, 2019). They continue to rework and refine their understanding of the principles, goals, and purpose of holistic education.

For example, the statement, *Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective* came out of a conference held in 1990, where 80 holistic educators gathered (Flake, 1993). The statement outlines 10 principles of a holistic perspective (educating for human development, honoring students as individuals, central role of experience, new role of educators, freedom of choice, educating for a participatory democracy, educating for global citizenship, educating for earth literacy, and spirituality and education). Ron Miller has noted that holistic education

1. nurtures the development of the whole person;
2. revolves around relationships (egalitarian, open and democratic relationships);
3. is concerned with life experiences (instead of "basic skills");
4. "recognizes that cultures are created by people and can be changed by people" (instead of conforming and replicating an established culture); and

5. is founded upon a "deep reverence for life and for the unknown (and never fully knowable) source of life." (as cited in Rudge, 2008, p. 19)

These overarching principles contain elements that are prevalent in many definitions, including honouring the humanity of each learner and of each educator. John Miller (2019b) outlines what he sees to be the aims of holistic education: wholeness and wellbeing, wisdom and compassion, awe and wonder, and sense of purpose and mastery. He also identifies three principles of holistic education: balance, inclusion, and connection. Perhaps most of all, for Miller (2007, 2019b), as for many pioneering thinkers, holistic education is about relationships: "the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationship between various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls" (2019b, p. 13). This sense of interconnectedness alongside wholeness captures an evolving understanding of holistic theory.

While there are many common themes and philosophies, there is no one definitive understanding of holistic education, despite decades of trying to paint a cohesive picture. Ron Miller cautioned against trying to reduce holistic education to a list of tools to employ. "Holistic education is *not* defined as a particular method or technique; it must be seen as a *paradigm*, a set of basic assumptions and principles that can be applied in diverse ways" (as cited in Rudge, 2008, p.6). With this in mind, we turn to some of the influential contributions to holistically oriented thinking.

Indigenous Education

Indigenous peoples have been acknowledged as the first holistic educators (Four Arrows & Miller, 2013; Miller, 2019a), and the central understandings of interconnectedness, sacredness,

and wholeness are at the core of Indigenous education. In his seminal text, *Look to the Mountain*, Gregory Cajete (1994) shows how (p. 207). This education for wholeness is in contrast to much of modern Western education, which is increasingly secular and focused on the achievement of intellectual gains and the productivity of the student, who is seen primarily as a future worker.

This critique—"education for wholeness, by striving for a level of harmony between individuals and their world, is an ancient foundation of the educational process of all cultures. In its most natural dimension all true education is transformative and Nature centred"—which saw education's misguided aim to create productive employees rather than well-rounded human beings, was mirrored in the work of the transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson who, in his criticism of education, asserted that we attempt to create adults out of children, where our primary concern appears to be creating workers. Emerson (1894) wrote:

> We sacrifice the genius of the pupil, the unknown possibilities of his nature, to a neat and safe uniformity, as the Turks whitewash the costly mosaics of ancient art, which the Greeks left on their temple walls. Rather let us have men whose manhood is only the continuation of their boyhood, natural characters still; such are able and fertile for heroic action; and not that sad spectacle with which we are too familiar, educated eyes in uneducated bodies. (p. 137)

In the third edition of *Holistic Curriculum*, Miller (2019b) brings greater attention to the role Indigenous education plays in an understanding of holistic education. In the forward to the third edition, Gregory Cajete connects Miller's work in holistic education to that of Indigenous education, where he articulates the aspects of holistic education that are "spiritual, ecological, soulful, and practical" (as cited in Miller, 2019b, ix).

In conversation with Four Arrows, John Miller argues that holistic education's goals are often spoken about, but they do not often become embodied in the work.

> We have conferences and courses on holistic education but often they do not move beyond the talk. We may start a course or conference with a minute of meditation, but we are still seeking ways to integrate more deeply the principles of interconnectedness, wholeness, and sacredness. (Four Arrows & Miller, 2013, p. 3)

Four Arrows agrees that much of holistic education is about embodiment, knowledge that is held sacred in Indigenous education. "We can learn from Indigenous education about practices that lead to this deeper integration (Four Arrows & Miller, 2013, p. 9).

Cajete (1994) argues for an Indigenous approach to education, one that honours the values and priorities of an integrated, holistic, and sacred approach to nature and to education. For Cajete, the crisis in education is in the disconnect between modern education and the natural world. "Those who identify most with the bottom line often suffer from an image without substance, technique without soul, and knowledge without context. The cumulative psychological result is usually alienation, loss of community, and a deep sense of incompleteness" (p. 25). According to Cajete, Indigenous education is "a grand story, a search for meaning, an essential food for the soul" (p. 27). This goal is one held by many holistic educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

Holistic education also holds as a priority an understanding of the importance of relationship; all too often in traditional education, this is seen only between people, but within the tradition of holistic and Indigenous education, humans are also seen in relationship with the plants and animals, air and water, with whom we share this earth. With this centring of relationship comes responsibility. Cajete challenges us to look ahead with an understanding of

the whole. “If our collective future is to be harmonious and whole, or if we are even to have a viable future to pass on to our children’s children, it is imperative that we actively envision and implement new ways of educating for ecological thinking and sustainability” (Cajete, 1994, p. 22).

Four Arrows asserts that holistic educators have not sufficiently acknowledged the connections between Indigenous and holistic education. “If,” says Four Arrows,

> the roots of holistic education are as clearly rooted in the ways of knowing that Indigenous peoples practiced successfully for tens of thousands of years, as I assert, should holistic educators not start making this connection explicit in light of the global crisis we face on Mother Earth today? (Four Arrows & Miller, 2013, p. 2)

The danger here is if non-Indigenous educators appropriate this Indigenous understanding of holism without acknowledging or even recognizing the connection to Indigenous belief systems. Cajete (1994) sees the irony in the call where “many creative Western thinkers have embraced essentially Indigenous environmental education views and are vigorously appropriating Indigenous concepts to support the development of their alternative models” (p. 22). As we learn from the Indigenous holistic education practiced from time immemorial, non-Indigenous educators must recognize the source of that wisdom as we carry it forward in our own learning and our own teaching.

Parallel Paths of Development and Nurturing the Roots

The ideas that have built holistic education include the work of romantic philosophers of the Enlightenment, transcendentalists in the mid-1880s, and progressive educators such as John Dewey, with his understanding of how children learn through experience, and Maria Montessori,

with her understanding of childhood development and the importance of understanding the whole child.

For Montessori, writing in *The Absorbent Mind* in 1949, the greatest learning comes from the experiences of the child. Education "is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment" (1995, p. 8). Dewey (1938) too, saw the power of experience and believed that all genuine education is gained through experience, which is at the core of Dewey's philosophy of education.

> I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based on experience—which is always the actual life—experience of some individual. (Dewey, 1938, p. 89)

Dewey believed that learning best takes place in a natural environment. His work continues to influence educators today; though his understanding of the methods of education does not align with all holistic education, his influence is reflected in the writing of many modern holistic educators.

Educational approaches, which focused on the whole child and on learning through experience, were fundamentally different approaches than those of the mainstream-school systems they were analyzing. While each of these thinkers evolved in different spaces, places, and times, they (from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Dewey) held in common the belief that the way forward in education would come from seeing and doing things very differently. Modern holistic educators such as Ron Miller, Parker Palmer, Jack Miller, and Four Arrows draw from these earlier thinkers, continuing to challenge the status quo of traditional education and building a modern understanding of holistic education.

Natural State of Children

Rousseau, in 1762, asked what is “the greatest, the most important, the most useful rule of education? It is: Do not save time, but lose it” (Rousseau, 2011, p. 67). Rousseau argued for the natural education of children up until the age of 12, at which point they are ready for reason and formal teaching. He also argued in favour of natural consequences for children over punishment, as children cannot understand wrong actions. “Give your scholar no verbal lessons; he should be taught by experience alone; never punish him, for he does not know what it is to do wrong” (p. 65). Rousseau believed that children are born “good” and that the more we cultivate and interfere with their natural state, the more negatively we influence them. In the opening sentence of Book 1 of *Emile*, Rousseau makes clear his feeling concerning the nature of children. “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil” (p. 2). Rousseau’s treatise on education is a cautionary tale about the need to protect children from civilization. Rousseau encourages tutors to take the children in their charge out of the city to the villages where they may happily explore with a freedom not accorded those in the city.

> Instead of keeping him mewed up in a stuffy room, take him out into a meadow every day; let him run about, let him struggle and fall again and again, the oftener the better; he will learn all the sooner to pick himself up. The delights of liberty will make up for many bruises. My pupil will hurt himself oftener than yours, but he will always be merry; your pupils may receive fewer injuries, but they are always thwarted, constrained, and sad. I doubt whether they are any better off. (p. 49)

Prior to reaching 12 years of age, according to Rousseau, the best thing to be done for children is to keep them away from the negative influence of civilization. Rousseau (2011) saw the best early education as protection from the world around the children in a tutor’s charge: “It

consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error" (Rousseau, p. 67).

Rousseau's (2011) understanding of the importance of protecting children (especially boys) from the world, assumes that those boys are privileged to have tutors to educate them, to take them away to the country-side so that they may not be corrupted by society. One example of this unacknowledged privilege is found in the famous story of Emile's beans and the gardener's melon seeds. Rousseau uses the story of the garden to demonstrate the natural teaching about private property. Emile plants his beans and inadvertently destroys the prized melon seeds of the gardener. In retaliation, the gardener destroys Emile's treasured beans. His tutor sees the learning opportunity and ensures that Emile sees the meaning of private property.

The garden was not needed for food for the gardener, for the tutor, or for Emile. Such an opportunity for idle time would not be afforded to peasants or impoverished children. This notion of learning without wanting for food or safety, or anything really, romanticizes the learning of the privileged few. Perhaps the poor and impoverished may receive a more "natural" education working in the fields, while the privileged Emile is planting beans, not to eat but to learn about the philosophical understanding of private ownership.

Transcendentalists

Heavily influenced by the work of Rousseau, the transcendentalists—led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, living in and around Concord in the 1800s—were a group of thinkers who wrote and thought about education, a life well lived, and environmentalism. These ideas influenced civil rights activists such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. (Miller, 2011). John Miller (2011) outlines how the legacy of the transcendentalists has been largely ignored in education. However, Miller's work convincingly shows that "they left an important legacy that can help us

move beyond today's narrow view of education that focuses on preparing students so that they can compete in the global economy" (p. 3). One hallmark of the work of the transcendentalists is their focus on the importance of the soul in education. The connection between the sacred and nature was never far from Thoreau's (2003) mind, evident in his words on the Concord River, which were first published in 1849. Thoreau said.

> The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such grovelling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. (p. 278)

Thoreau dedicated his life to living simply, as demonstrated in his time living on Walden Pond, where he spent time immersed in nature and writing the now famous *Walden*.

Another transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, whose work influenced educators and feminists, encouraged learners, especially women, to follow the wisdom given them by their soul. Fuller (2012), in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, originally published in 1843, prompted us to look inward:

> Give the soul free course, let the organization, both of body and mind, be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called. The intellect, no more than the sense of hearing, is to be cultivated merely that Woman may be a more valuable companion to Man, but because the Power who gave a power, by its mere existence signifies that it must be brought out toward perfection. (p. 63)

For Fuller, the goal was not to give facts to the learner, but to draw out their inner wisdom (Miller, 2011). Fuller organized conversations for women in her home, as she believed the development of ideas belonged to the world of women as much as to the world of men. Fuller challenged conventional notions of education for both men and women. She was influenced by

Rousseau's belief in the inherent goodness of children (Miller, 2011) and has been called one of the most influential women of the 19th century. Fuller has been credited with influencing early feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was critical of the school system as it was established, asserting that we have the wrong purpose in education. For Emerson, the secret of education lies in respecting the student, not in teaching facts and skills to make great workers. He wrote in 1841, "We do not give them training as if we believed in their noble nature. We scarce educate their bodies. We do not train the eye and the hand. . . . We aim to make accountants, attorneys, engineers, but not make able, earnest, great-hearted men" Emerson (2000, p. 211). He argued in favour of doing things differently, not as we always have. "It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do" (Emerson, n.d., para 29). Emerson encouraged teachers not only to keep the academics, the traditional learning, but also to "smuggle in a little contraband wit, fancy, imagination, thought" Emerson (2000, p. 107). Here we see the awe and joy of life that the transcendentalists also called for in their reverence for nature.

Emerson believed that while we can and should learn from other great thinkers, this ought to be balanced by life outside of academia. In his 1837 essay "The American Scholar," he argued that "life is our dictionary" and that the great soul will be "strong to live, as well as strong to think" (2000, p. 51). To Emerson, the scholar must learn "by nature, by books, and by action" (p. 52).

For Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, "real" learning does not take place in the libraries and halls of schools, or at least not only there. Like Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, publishing Walden in 1854, believed experience was the greatest of teachers.

> Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month—the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this—or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a Rodgers penknife from his father? (Thoreau, 2000, p. 49)

Learning authentically, through experiences connected to life rather than connected to the walls of a library or a school, connect learning to purpose, which all too often is found lacking in modern school environments. This notion of authentic learning continues to reverberate with holistic educators.

Wholeness and Interconnectedness

Both modern and pioneering holistic educators aim to teach all aspects of the self. Deborah Orr (2005) asserts that "holistic education means that we strive to teach the whole person as a human soul which includes mind, body, emotions, and spirit" (p. 87). It is an aim of modern holistic educators, like those who influenced their thinking, to work against the fragmentation of the child. Brantmeier (2019) asserts that holistic education

> attempts to heal fragmented, decontextualized, robotic forms of human learning that have threatened impassioned inquiry in our pursuits to make sense and meaning of an amazingly complex, simple, and elegant existence. Holistic education cultivates wisdom and equanimity—greatness of mind and kindness of heart. (p. 80)

For holistic educators like Kessler (2005), the spiritual development of students in classrooms is crucial to their search for meaning and purpose. However, as Kessler asserts, when purpose is taught, it is primarily done "through goal setting and decision-making, often with strictly rational techniques" (p. 103). If the inner life or the spiritual dimension of the student is

omitted, says Kessler, they will be more likely to base their decisions on external pressures. When we fail to give students the opportunity to explore the existential questions, we are not honouring them and too often are taking away essential learning opportunities. Holistic education, in contrast, is not focused on improving test scores; it is about connecting mind, body, spirit, and emotions to authentic, real learning. Holistic education is about authenticity and it is about integrity.

Soul/Sacredness

As definitions have evolved over time, some educators have been more or less comfortable with the spiritual dimensions of spirit/soul. Some educators remove the discussion of spirituality from their work altogether, and "their work provides a bridge for teachers who are more comfortable with a wholistic perspective" (Miller, 2019b, p. 14). Other writers use soul and spirit interchangeably. For example, Mary Beattie (2019) understands them both "as describing that non-material, ineffable aspect of ourselves that animates us and gives our lives purpose" (p. 254).

Nel Noddings has written extensively on caring and morality in education as she advocates for teaching the whole child. For Noddings, there is an important distinction between institutional religion and spirituality. While Noddings does not advocate for proselytizing within the public-school system, she does maintain that teaching *about* religion and spirituality is necessary for the human journey. In conversation with Joan Montgomery Halford (1999), Noddings clarified:

> It's important for everybody because religion has had such influence on both our public and our private lives. Religion is one avenue to the existential questions. It is a rather

> poor life that never asks the questions, how should we live? Is there a meaning to life? Why is there something rather than nothing? (quoted in Halford, 1999, p. 28)

In this research, the terms spirit/soul are not used in the conventionally religious sense; rather they are used in recognition of what Ron Miller (2009) calls the "essential elements of our inherent nature" (p. 1). I have come to understand soul as the individual, introspective aspect of self, while I see spirit as the invisible web that connects us in community and in relationship. This understanding is compatible with John Miller's (2019b) understanding that soul "overlaps powerfully with the spirit which is our reach beyond ourselves, our appreciation for the sublime and the ineffable. In short, soul is our depth, connection, and reach" (p. 54).

Miller (2019) attests that holistic learning "is about educating the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—within the context of an interconnected world." (p. 5b). Rachel Kessler (2000) uses the word soul "to call for attention in schools to the inner life; to the depth dimension of human experience; to students' longings for something more than an ordinary, material, and fragmented existence" (p. 11). Similarly, Ron Miller (1995–1996) asserts that

> when holistic educators refer to the spiritual aspect of an individual's wholeness, they mean that the vital force which animates one's personality is not an objectifiable psychological or biological process but a deeply creative, self-unfolding, purposeful, meaning-seeking spark of consciousness that in some mysterious way connects the person directly to the vast evolving drama of the cosmos. (p. 85)

An exploration of the metaphysical nature of the soul is beyond the scope of this chapter. For my purposes here, I am writing of that core aspect of our inner world, a part of ourselves too often brushed aside in the business of the everyday school flow. When we talk about mind, body, spirit, and emotion separately, we run the risk of fracturing and alienating one from the other. If

we are to discuss learning truly holistically, we must understand that they are not independent and separate entities. In traditional mainstream schooling, we tend to separate mind from body, spirit/soul from emotions. Kessler (2005) asserts that

> the body of the child will not grow if it is not fed; the mind will not flourish unless it is stimulated and guided. And the spirit will suffer if it is not nurtured. A soulful education embraces diverse ways to satisfy the spiritual hunger of today's youth. (p. 11)

As both a student and an educator, it has been my experience that in mainstream schooling, very little attention is given to the spirit and little more is given to emotions. Some attention is given to the body; however, schools continue to focus most of their attention on students' minds, kept discrete from spirit, emotions, and body. There is intense pressure on educators, on families, and in turn, on children to be academically successful, which is seen to create the opportunity for their future success. Eaude (2019) asserts that "primary schools increasingly offer a narrow curriculum, focused on discrete, decontextualized skills in literacy and numeracy, the aspects of English and Mathematics which can be tested relatively easily" (p. 62).

Maria Montessori (1995) saw the dangers of creating false divides between the components of the self that together make the person whole.

> We cannot separate two things that nature has put together. If we consider physical life on one side and mental life on the other, we break the cycle of relation, and the actions of man remain separated from the brain. The motor actions of man are used to aid better eating and breathing, whereas the real purpose is that movement be the servant of the whole life and of the spiritual, universal economy of the world. (p. 101)

Thoreau similarly lived his understanding that nature and movement are intricately interconnected. He believed that we fail to honour the complexity of the human self if we do not recognize learning as a whole-person adventure. “A man thinks as well through his legs and arms as his brain. We exaggerate the importance and exclusiveness of the headquarters” (1967, p. 212).

In contrast, Hart (2019) asserts that, for holistic educators, “the roots of our education are about preparing us for a life of flourishing and fulfillment by developing our humanity, our human consciousness, our mind and soul” (p. 336). Often the work that is done in schools connecting emotions (e.g., Social and Emotional Learning, SEL programs), the spirit (e.g., mindfulness) and the body (e.g., physical-education class, support for active recess) are justified because they are done *in service of* educational achievement (the mind), rather than with an understanding for their own value. Writing in 1949, Maria Montessori saw this misunderstanding of the importance and value of movement.

> As a part of school life, which gives priority to the intellect, the role of movement has always been sadly neglected. When accepted there at all, it has only been under the heading of “exercise,” “physical education,” or “games.” But this is to overlook its close connection with the developing mind. (p. 136)

Harkening back to the work of Thoreau, writing in 1862, who saw the value of preserving “health and spirits” by “sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields” (2000, p. 629), he saw it as soul nourishing to get out into the woods. He dismissed the notion of exercise separate from living.

> But the walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours,—as the swinging of dumb-bells or chairs; but it

> is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day. If you would get exercise, go in search of the springs of life. (p. 631)

Leading With the Head

It is well understood that holistic education aims to bring all aspects of the self into balance. This principle—"the importance of teaching the whole child" mind, body, and spirit—is one that most, if not all, holistic educators hold in common (Miller, 2019a, p. 149). Holistic education is not a romantic abstraction that simply ignores the intellect. Within a holistic worldview, learning takes all of the learner's self into account.

Holistic educators do not advocate for ignoring the mind; instead, they aim to find a balance, not prioritizing any one of mind, body, spirit, or emotion above the other, and not separating them from each other. Parker Palmer (2017) brings this to the forefront of his writing about holistic teaching and learning.

> Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best. (p. 5)

In a similar vein, Jane Bone (2019) asserts that we often artificially divide the brain from the rest of our bodies and, in doing so, disconnect mind from body.

> In the human struggle to become more intelligent, raise the IQ, be first in the class, and become an A grade student, it is easy to forget that the brain is part of the body and is nourished in physical movement and by the movement of the breath. (p. 72)

Palmer, Bone, and other holistic educators challenge us to recognize the danger inherent in valuing the mind over the other components of the whole. They also remind us of the danger

of fragmentation when we see these aspects of self in isolation, whether it is mind, body, spirit, or emotion. In holistic education, all aspects of the self are woven into the whole.

For Moore (2019), a deeper understanding of the role of educators is profound. "My final word on holism in education . . . is to suggest that educators might consider their deep work as taking care of the health of their students' souls, even as they focus on learning and knowledge" (p. 56). These scholars and educators are not suggesting we should forgo work with the head/mind. They *are*, however, suggesting that, all too often, we are failing to honour the interconnectedness of minds with our bodies, spirit, and emotion.

Korhagen and Nuijten's (2019) work notes that while traditional education does not always and only focus on cognition in learning, it is certainly a pattern in much of traditional learning environments. While a focus on cognitive aspects of learning is not *wrong*, they assert, "this one-sided focus tends to lead to a certain imbalance. It is often overlooked that including the affective and motivational dimensions in learning and professional growth leads to more positive outcomes, including academic outcomes" (Korhagen & Nuitjen, 2019, p. 90). Even if we were interested only in the academic achievement of students, (certainly not advocated by holistic educators), a holistic approach supports students in their cognitive achievement.

The Interconnected Holistic Educator

A holistic understanding of learning is not an individualistic, child-centred agenda—a holistic understanding includes the individual in relationship with others, with community, with society, with the planet, and indeed, with the cosmos. For Ron Miller (2000), "Holism asserts that *everything* exists in relationship, in a context of connection and meaning—and that any change or event causes a realignment, however slight, throughout the entire pattern" (p. 21). This interconnectedness recognizes that everyone is implicated in the learning process—children,

adults, families, and educators, both within the walls of a school and in the communities outside of the school.

It is not enough to attend only to the mind, body, spirit, and emotion of the *children* with whom we work. Holistic educators must also work towards being whole *ourselves*. At our best, we teach with our whole, "undivided" selves. In that quest to live an undivided life, we work to come to know ourselves more deeply and authentically, to live each day what we believe, for, as Parker Palmer (2017) asserted, when we are "at home in our own souls, we become more at home with each other" (p. 5). This kind of learning, teaching, and living together demands a greater investment by everyone involved, and everyone is changed in the process.

For Rachael Kessler (2005), it is not enough to invite students to engage in spiritual development if educators are not also ready to invite their own development. "Since 'we teach who we are,' teachers who invite heart and soul into the classroom also find it essential to nurture their own spiritual development" (p.102). When educators work to bring their whole, undivided selves to their learning and teaching with children, the environment undergoes a metaphorphosis in which everyone can grow together.

Holistic education does not "merely dispense knowledge; it does so in a way that both the teacher and the student's souls are engaged and benefit" (Moore, 2019, p. 56). Once again, holistic education is relational, not discrete. The danger in the dichotomous nature of a divided self puts us in "either-or boxes" (Palmer, 2017, p. 68), where "we separate head from heart. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that do not know how to think" (p. 68). The work of the holistic educator is more than a professional commitment; it is a deeply personal one as well, where both student and educator are implicated. "When we honour *our* souls, we enlarge our capacity for honouring *others*' souls, too" (p. 68). This work creates a space where

children and adults alike feel welcome and safe and develop a profound sense of community and belonging.

The Holistic Learner, Freedom, and Self-Direction

According to Miller (2019b), the primary focus in developing a holistic education is found in the personal growth and development of the teacher. Further, Miller advises that it is not complicated to know how to encourage that growth: "Teachers should simply learn to be with their students. In being with students, we are fully present" (Miller, 2007, p. 192). Being present can allow us to develop holistic, authentic relationships with our students. However, as Miller (2019b) later stated, this is not automatic, where "a holistic curriculum in the hands of a transmission-oriented teacher will become a transmission curriculum" (p. 215). When committing to a holistic pedagogy, the educator commits to self-reflection and growth.

It is not only the educator who is impacted in this relationship. How does holistic education affect the learner? Of course, I understand all educators to be learners just as all learners are also educators. What can a student expect from holistic learning? According to Miller, it is a tall order!

> Holistic education should help the student find a sense of purpose in life. Education should help the student discover what they are good at and how they commit themselves to working on those gifts or talents. Education should provide spaces for this to happen; a narrow curriculum that focuses on the "three Rs" is an obstacle to this discovery. (Miller, 2019b, p. 9)

For holistic educators, the fourth R is the most important: relationship. Meaningful, authentic relationships, for both educators and learners, are at the core of holistic learning: relationship with the self, with others, and with the world around them (Kessler, 2005). This

work cannot exist in isolation away from our own self-work. "By working on ourselves, we hope to foster in our students a deep sense of connectedness within themselves and other beings on this planet" (Greene & Kim, 2019, p. 104). This self-reflective work ensures educators connect with the whole child.

According to Ron Miller (1995–1996) and others, it is not in the strategies or pedagogical moves that holistic educators work with the whole child. Rather, says Miller, spirituality is nourished

> by the quality of relationship that is developed between person and world. We can, and must, cultivate an attitude of caring, respect, and contemplation to replace the narrow modernist view that the world is a resource to be exploited. This simple but profound change in attitude is the essential ingredient of all the emerging visions of cultural and educational renewal. (p. 88)

Similarly, Palmer (2017) says, "the connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—the place where intellect and emotion and spirit will converge in the human self" (p. 11).

Rousseau in 1762 argued that children would learn when the need for learning presents itself, such as in the case of speaking. "Still less should you hurry him into speech; he will learn to talk when he feels the want of it" (2011, p. 26). Rousseau, like many holistic educators, sees the education of the child completed without much thought for the child itself.

> The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man. What is to be thought of that cruel education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, that burdens a child with all

> sorts of restrictions and begins by making him miserable, in order to prepare him for some far-off happiness which he might never enjoy? (p. 50)

This understanding of self-directed learning continues to be reflected in the work of modern holistic educators.

Tony Eaude (2019) introduces the concept of hospitable space, “where all children are welcomed, nurtured, and attended to and given a broad range of opportunities, and adults respect what children bring to the situation, even where this is not what is normally valued in formal school settings” (p. 66). In a hospitable space, children can be trusted to make decisions that are not over-mitigated with hyper-vigilance. They are given the freedom to learn how, when, and what is meaningful for them.

Holistic Theory—A “Pedagogy of Privilege?”

Holistic pedagogy invites educators to engage in relationship-based education with children, to see the whole child—head, heart, and hands—and to explore how both learners and educators are implicated and changed in their learning together. However, holistic education’s potential for empowering, humanizing, and “uplifting the human spirit” (*Holistic Education Review*, n.d., para 2) does not reach all learners equally. Often holistic educators work in private schools or other venues, where they are free from the constraints all too often found in public schools. In these alternative locations, they can focus on the ethical and pedagogical insights of holistic education (Owen, 2021).

However, this means that holistic-education opportunities are not available to all, and are all too often siloed in places that “unfortunately, and perhaps insidiously, depend upon and reinforce privilege” (Luvmour, 2021, p. 1). Holistic educator Michael Carberry (2019) calls on holistic educators to tend to the inequity of private versus public education systems. Carberry

emphasizes the importance of acknowledging "the immense privilege inherent in the private school model" (p. 2). If holistic pedagogy is also going to be an emancipatory pedagogy, it must be available to all.

The challenges to the future of holistic education find their roots in its past. Owen (2021) asserts that holistic educators need to be reflective about the privilege that come with socially dominant identities, and to commit to "the arduous work of identifying our ethnocentric assumptions, biases, and fragility." The work, insists Owen, "is to examine our systems for structural barriers to equity, as well to what degree our school cultures support cultural openness and responsiveness, or still need work." (p. 2) This work cannot begin until members of the school/learning communities have come to see the privilege from which they are benefiting. This in itself is a part of the work.

Blindness to privilege exists in many social justice-oriented initiatives, not only holistic education. Davis (2019) reminds us that, with the exception of movements began by people of colour themselves, "nearly all social movements in the US in the last century started out virtually all-white and failed to engage issues of race, particularly in their early decades" (p. 36). As holistic educators look towards the future, it is imperative that we do not repeat that error of history.

If holistic education ignores racism and whiteness, Debbie Millon (2021) writes, it will be seen as uninformed, irrelevant, and potentially racist; rather, she notes, "we need to be responsive to the 'needs of evolving human beings' and an evolving, aching society" (p. 1). Anyone who aims to nurture the development of the whole person simply cannot afford to be neutral.

In her writing about the imperative to de-centre whiteness in holistic education, Debbie Millon (2021) explores her discomfort with her own whiteness.

> I've grown to see how our lives are saturated by the dominant culture of whiteness—it's "the water in which we swim." For those of us who belong to the dominant culture, whiteness can be invisible and provides a list of advantages, both significant and minor; for others not in the dominant group, whiteness is very much seen and felt, oppressive and harming. (p. 2)

Millon (2021) challenges us to bring our own identity to our holistic equity work. She begins her vision to advance holistic education by providing information about her own identity and the (ad)vantage point from which she speaks. I will take her lead in locating my own whiteness and privilege.

Begin With Identity

I was born in rural Ontario in the early 1970s to two white parents. My parents grew up in Toronto (my dad) and in a rural community outside of Sudbury (my mom). When they met, my mother was studying journalism at Carleton University. She left university to marry my father. She would not complete her university degree until after my son was born and she had become a grandmother. My father, not having completed high school, was working as a reporter. Before I was born, they moved to the rural community in which I grew up.

We lived a working-class lifestyle, first on a farm outside of town, later in a house on a small lot on the edge of town. We had hydro when we first moved into town; plumbing was added after we moved in.

My childhood community, both within the Community School and public school, was characterized by very little racial diversity. In public elementary school, there were no more than

one or two Black students at any time. This racial homogeneity continued in high school, where Spanish and Iranian exchange students brought some of the only diversity to the school experiences.

As I have grown older, I have also grown increasingly aware of how privilege has held doors open for me, and I continue learning about how my whiteness benefits me in all aspects of my life. The parent-teachers who created and ran the Community School at the centre of this study undoubtedly had the privilege of whiteness. While their work through the Community School certainly had social-justice aims, ironically, the work and the school might not have been accessible for non-white parents and their families, who might not have been able to pick up and move to the rural location where the school was founded. The back-to-the-land movement of the area was, almost without exception, devoid of people of colour. This absence of diversity, while in many ways typical of social-justice movements, was not open equally to everyone.

If we wish for education to start, as Jack Miller (2021) believes it should, "from a place where the cosmos, the earth, and our lives, are seen as interconnected and sacred," (p. 5), we must invite all people to join in that learning together, and not only provide those opportunities for learners and educators who have the privilege to do so.

A Note on the Researcher-Educator-Learner

As I explore the umbrella concepts of interconnectedness, sacredness, wholeness, freedom, and simplicity, it is easy to stay in the realm of the theoretical. Interconnectedness is about our relationships with self, with others, with the plants and animals with whom we share this space, as well as with the air, the sun, and the stars.

Sacredness for me contains the awe and joy of living and learning with "singing souls" (Miller, 2011, p. 27). It can be seen within—in our inner nature—as well as without, in the world

around us, as epitomized in Emerson's (1841) viewing of the sacred in the every day. "The man, who has seen the rising moon break out of the clouds at midnight, has been present like an archangel at the creation of light and of the world" (2000, p.113). Parker Palmer (2017) reminds us that knowledge of our inner lives is essential if we are to connect with the inner life of any great thing. This connection between interconnectedness and sacredness reminds us of the great truth of holism. Everything is interconnected and nothing can be reduced to its discrete parts.

Wholeness involves ensuring that we are not living and learning with fragmentation, recognizing the whole in all that we see and do, and in the ways that we purposefully live in the moment, for as Thoreau (2000) taught us, "above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present moment," the "gospel according to this moment" (p. 662). In seeing the value of wholeness in ourselves,—mind, body, spirit, and emotion—and in the entirety of the world—which can be seen and held in the single drop of water—we see the importance of living an undivided life as we strive to live what we believe.

Freedom is seen in the trust we afford one another and ourselves to learn what we need to learn, as we need to learn it. We must honour ourselves with this freedom of self-directed learning first, before we can share this freedom in our teaching. Fuller (2012) reminds us that we learn as souls, which should be without the constraints of the "accidents of birth" pushed upon learners due to the expectations of society. "Sex, like rank, wealth, beauty, or talent, is but an accident of birth. As you would not educate a soul to be an aristocrat, so do not to be a woman" (p. 208).

I was recently reminded of the importance of appreciating and living my holistic and "undivided" self. I spent some time in hospital and then at home convalescing from unexpected, life-saving surgery. I had high expectations of how I would use my time "off" from my paid

work as an educator productively, getting ahead on my doctoral work, taking advantage of the "extra" time I would have, while healing my body, to use my mind. Even while studying holistic theory, it was difficult for me to slow down and reflect on my own expectations about how my body's healing would impact my mind, spirit, and emotions. It was difficult to give myself permission to challenge my own unconscious assumptions. I needed to purposefully ensure that I allow my mind to know how to feel and to heal, along with my body and spirit.

I take this reminder with me as I work to live theory as praxis, paradigm as life.

Chapter Four: Critical Pedagogy

In establishing the community school at the centre of this research, parent-teachers were attempting to create a learning environment that honoured the whole child. Their work questioned many assumptions of mainstream education, in the spirit of critical theory—though they would not have called the school holistic, nor would they have called their work critical. The school was in operation during the 1970s and 80s when the language of holistic theory was in its infancy. The language of critical pedagogy—while in keeping with much of the school organizers' philosophy and intent—was not developed until the 1980s (Cho, 2013). Broadly speaking, many concepts now attributed to critical pedagogy were practiced by many educators before the language of critical pedagogy was developed (McLaren, 2015), and this may be the case with the originators of the Community School.

In this chapter, I explore the role critical pedagogy has played in the thinking of educators, and some of the ways they challenge the hegemonic nature of schooling within mainstream schools. I will review the history of critical pedagogy through the influences of the Frankfurt School and the work of key players in critical pedagogy, such as Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, and Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, and Henry Giroux. I will close the chapter by making connections to the Community School.

First, we turn to defining critical pedagogy.

Defining Critical Pedagogy

There may be as many definitions of critical pedagogy as there are critical pedagogues. Many would likely agree with Cho's (2013) assessment that "the fundamental aim of critical pedagogy is to construct schools and education as 'agents of change'" (p. 1), though disagreements continue about whether this is possible within mainstream schooling. Critical

pedagogy aims to create spaces that are more egalitarian and to provide opportunities for voice and agency for all learners, particularly those who have traditionally been marginalized.

Differentiating teaching with a critical pedagogy from teaching critical thinking is key to understanding critical pedagogy, which is not merely about ensuring students can analyze information presented to them. According to Giroux (2007), it is also about thinking outside of the classroom and outside of the acceptance of societal norms. Critical-thinking skills are essential, of course, but critical pedagogy goes beyond this analysis and, according to Giroux,

> is concerned with providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities both to question deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the most archaic and disempowering social practices that structure every aspect of society and to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit. (p. 2)

Critical pedagogy is about more than agency and voice within the classroom; it is about connecting learning with life both inside and outside of the classroom and building understanding about the impacts of inequity on the lives of all people. Freire's (2000) seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the active role of learners alongside educators as well as their responsibility in the development of a more just world.

> The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. . . . Education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism. (Freire, pp. 81, 86)

To make real change in schools, critical pedagogy must reflect the macro-goal of challenging power relationships and highlighting the possibility of hope and change, as well as use micro-strategies for realizing that goal. With that in mind, Ira Shor (1992) defines critical pedagogy as

> habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

McLaren (2015) understands the objectives of critical pedagogy "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices" (p. 122). In his call to action in the sixth edition of *Life in Schools*, McLaren summarizes what critical educators need to know and to do, and it is no small task. His commentary on critical pedagogy is worth quoting here at length:

> We need to learn as much today from agro-ecology trainers in Cuba as by the Frankfurt School of critical theorists. Critical educators today need a dose of Freire's positive utopianism and open futurity and a renewed optimism, which is difficult, I know, in the face of so much planetary devastation. We need a reformation of critical theory and rehumanization of teaching that develops concrete practices, and this means we need to break the division between pedagogy and theory. . . . Armed with the idea that the dehumanization of our youth is but a brief parenthesis in the history of education, critical educators must believe that with a renewed optimism of the will, education will be overtaken by social justice, and despair overtaken by commitment. (p. 280)

It should be clear that critical pedagogy is deeply political and counter-hegemonic. Critical pedagogy has a rich tradition of challenging the hidden discourses of power and domination.

Frankfurt School Influences

Critical pedagogues continue to draw inspiration from the Frankfurt School, whose members included Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin (Darder et al., 2017; McLaren, 2015). The Institute for Social Research, home of the Frankfurt School, was established in response to the political and social environment of the early 20th century, including the rise of Nazi Germany and capitalism, and aimed to become a "force against domination in all forms" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 9).

According to Jeffries (2016), the critical theory of the 1930s "stood in opposition to all those ostensibly craven individual tendencies that thrived in the twentieth century and served as tools to keep an irksome social order in place—logical positivism, value-free science, positivist sociology, among others" (p. 21). To the Frankfurt School thinkers, mass media and its influence on culture had become forces creating new forms of domination (Giroux, 2007; Jeffries, 2016). According to Marcuse, Habermas, and Fromm, not only had mass goods become commonplace, they and mass media also had gained mass acceptance (Jeffries, 2016). Marcuse wrote about this mass acceptance in his 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*.

> If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television programme and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer . . . if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population. (Marcuse, 1991, p. 10)

Where Marx famously saw religion as the opium of the masses, here the anesthetic becomes the mass production of mass goods. The Frankfurt School, and the changing socio-economic realities of the 1930s and 40s, made the traditional Marxist analysis of class as the ultimate determiner incomplete. The new analysis would come to equate mass culture with mass manipulation. I expect Marcuse and others would find wisdom in the maxim “if you aren’t paying for the product, you are the product.” It seemed to The Frankfurt School thinkers that there would never be a revolution—the marginalized had become too comfortable to revolt.

Critical Pedagogy Today

To the bleak vision of the masses complacently accepting their oppression, Paulo Freire brought the pedagogy of hope, of love, and the oppressed. Freire’s (2000) critique of mainstream education informs an understanding of the power dynamics that are “socially and historically constituted” (p. 237). Freire’s work introduced the influential banking concept of education,

> in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. (p. 42)

Freire’s understanding of conscientization is key to the transformative potential in education, where understanding the oppressive nature of schooling can lead to challenging the dominant ideology, which must, in keeping with goals of critical pedagogy, lead to change. For Freire, the awakening of awareness to oppression was key to liberation. Similar to theorists in the Frankfurt school, Freire saw liberation coming only if there was an awakened awareness to the oppression, rather than seeing neutrality everywhere.

He differed in that he believed that liberation *could* occur. His hope did not come from naïveté; it came from an imperative of survival. “Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness” (Freire, 1994, p. 3). To hope, Maxine Greene (2009) brings imagination; she invites educators to see beyond the “what is” and to “push on the existing order of things” (Greene, 2009). She shows us that in the world where imagination is alive, we can create situations in which “persons caring for one another, [are] able to look through one another’s eyes, talk about what they are discovering together about themselves, about the world, about what is and what might be” (Greene, 1996, p. 108). To critical pedagogues, education is inherently political, never neutral, and teachers in the bureaucratic system of mainstream education maintain and reproduce the status quo.

Critical theorists working in education challenge the status quo, which they see serving the dominant ideology. It is a theory of action that calls educators to work for change in schooling. Fischman and McLaren (2005) assert that for educators working in a critical pedagogy framework, “it is not enough to understand any given educational reality; there is a pedagogical mandate to transform it with the goal of radically democratizing educational sites and societies through a shared praxis” (pp. 425–426). Critical pedagogy does not end with understanding the marginalization and inequity—that is merely the starting point. Drawing on hope and imagination, critical pedagogues work through what is, towards what might be.

Many critical educators who push against the status quo envision a more holistic education as one way to seek learning that is more equitable. In this project, I aim to share examples of a different way of learning, through collecting the stories of those who taught and learned in an alternative, more holistic education setting, such as in community schools. To

hooks (2003), holistic and critical educators' actions come to life when "education that serves to enhance our students' journey to wholeness stands as a challenge to the existing status quo" (p. 181). For the parent-teachers, becoming a part of something bigger was the motivation for the choices for their children's learning. It was about much more than school. Kathy explained that for the creators of the school, it was about making change in the way things were. She shared that "education also meant making a difference in the world, and not wanting our kids to be a part of the training for society as it was. Wanting them to be a part of a different kind of society."

For Kincheloe et al. (2018),"critical theorists take apart normalized notions of democracy, freedom, opportunity structures, and social justice to denounce systems of power and domination, including the transnationalist capitalist class and the political structures that support them" (p. 236). For the 40 years since Freire's (2000) influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* many critical educators have been working towards changing this oppressive banking model, in favour of transformative pedagogy. However, many classrooms still operate within the traditional banking model, which prioritizes standardized testing over relationships and the transfer of facts over the co-creation of understanding.

To those educators who contend that these choices are not political, Ira Shor (1992) asserts that prioritizing academic achievement over all else, without questioning the implications of this kind of schooling on society, is never impartial. "It cuts off the students' development as critical thinkers about their world. If the students' task is to memorize rules and existing knowledge, without questioning the subject matter or the learning process, their potential for critical thought and action will be restricted" (p. 12). Similarly, McLaren (2015) contends that liberal and conservative analysis of school favours the interests of the ruling class, rather than

becoming sites of transformation. Further, says McLaren, the promise of the liberal notion of school as a great equalizer does not empower critically active citizens (p. 126).

Value Neutrality, the Great Equalizer, and Other Myths of Mainstream Schooling

Mainstream education has been held up as the great equalizer, working to erase inequities and make the reality for all marginalized groups more just. Critical theorists, who assert that equity was never the goal in the first place, challenge the belief that education has simply not yet met the goal of equalization. Instead, schools are seen as sorting machines, not equalizers (Cho, 2013), replicating power imbalances and marginalization. Not only do schools not ensure equal opportunities for all students but also critical pedagogy sees that they reproduce the existing inequalities (Cho, 2013).

Critical theorists argue that when educators attempt to be neutral, they are supporting the dominant ideology in society (Freire, 2000; Miller, 2002; Shor, 1992). Critical pedagogy reflects the belief that educators "cannot be neutral about injustice; either they stand for a more just social vision or stand back and allow society to manipulate their consciousness" (Miller, 2002, p. 71). To critical theorists, educators are never neutral; through action, educators stand for the status quo or they stand against it. Paulo Freire and others recognize that what we *wish* for the world to be does not sit in isolation from what it *is*. "Put simply, it takes impatience with the way things are to motivate people to make changes, but then it takes patience to study and to develop the projects through which constructive learning and change are made" (Shor, 1992, p. 25).

Shor's (1992) work in empowering education demands that educators reconsider and challenge our unexamined assumptions. "Education can socialize students into critical thought or into dependence on authority, that is, into autonomous habits of mind or into passive habits of following authorities, waiting to be told what to do and what things mean" (p. 13). This

emphasizes the practical actions any educator can take in the classroom in challenging the reproduction of inequity. Giroux (2019) contends that ignoring the broader relationship between schools and society works to perpetuate and obfuscate inequity, as

> dominant educational discourses fail to analyze how the school as an agent of social and cultural control is mediated and contested by those whose interests it does not serve. In part, this is due to a functionalist view of schooling, which sees schools as serving the needs of the dominant society without questioning either the nature of that society or the effects it has on the daily practices of schooling itself. (p. 131)

Schooling is a complex and contradictory enterprise with competing interests—empowerment and subjugation. The influence of the powerful elite defaults towards the status quo, which inevitably leads to the ongoing replication of inequity and imbalance. McLaren (2015) asserts that, generally, "critical theorists maintain that schools have always functioned in ways that rationalize the knowledge industry into class-divided tiers; that reproduce inequality, racism, sexism, and homophobia; and that fragment democratic social relations through an emphasis on competitiveness and cultural ethnocentrism" (McLaren, 2015, p. 123). For Freire, Giroux, McLaren, and others, the critical project of transforming schools is not simply about the interpretation of culture (as is understood in constructivism); it is about the transformation of that culture into a more just society and about redistribution of power and wealth. It is a pedagogy of liberation (McLaren, 1999).

No Specificity to What Critical Pedagogues "Do"

Critical pedagogy, broadly speaking, is concerned with issues of equity and of working towards creating a more just world. While critical pedagogues may be aligned in their overarching goal, a shared understanding of this goal does not mean that there is broad

agreement in how to meet that goal, as critical pedagogy is not composed of a homogenous set of ideas. The *why*, as all-encompassing as it is, may be the easy part. If we know the reproduction of inequity to be the common outcome of mainstream education, *how* do we subvert that reproduction?

Ira Shor (1992) focuses his attention on the *how* of critical pedagogy when he encourages teachers to challenge the very purpose of mainstream schooling: "A school year that begins by questioning school could be a remarkably democratic and critical learning experience for children" (p. 11). Empowering education, as described by Shor, includes an agenda of values, which works to challenge the status quo and the (faulty) assumption that anything that happens in schools can be value-neutral.

> In sum, subject matter, the learning process, the classroom discourse, the cafeteria menu, the governance structure, and the environment of school teach students what kind of people to be and what kind of society to build as they learn math, history, biology, literature, nursing or accounting. Education is more than facts and skills. . . . Historically it has underserved the mass of students passing through its gates. Can school become empowering? What educational values can develop people as citizens who think critically and act democratically? (p. 15)

While educators may differ in their beliefs about how to ensure that education can become empowering, the base belief in the importance of empowerment never waivers, nor does the feeling of responsibility for critical educators to work toward that goal, with whichever strategies they employ.

Critiques of Critical Pedagogy

Given critical pedagogy's objective to transform existing social inequities, perhaps the irony of the near homogeneity of white, male writers in the early writing is not lost on many of them. In the past, the recognized major architects of critical pedagogy were white men. There were notable exceptions, such as bell hooks and Maxine Greene. McLaren (2015) raises the issue of marginalization when he asks, "Why do we learn about the 'great men' in history and spend less time learning about the contributions of women and minorities and the struggles of people in exploited economic classes?" (p. 134).

By amplifying the voices of the marginalized, critical educators continue to question whose voices are being heard and whose voices are not. Cho (2013) cautions against the dangers of essentialism; she asserts, "It is one thing to criticize the Euro-, male-, middle-class-, or heterosexual-centeredness in a given theory, but it is quite another to reject such theories on the sole basis that they are written by middle-class, heterosexual white men" (p. 82). Like McLaren, Cho recognizes the importance of representation from those other than white, heterosexual, cis men. For Cho, the project becomes one of multiplicity and inclusion, in recognition of the corrective response to a Marxist tendency to overemphasize class over other types of domination. "In understanding and reclaiming students' experience, it is of utmost importance to pay close attention to the diverse social locations of students'—again, that of class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, disability, and other marginalized statuses" (p. 84).

The work of critical pedagogues to ensure that marginalized voices are not merely orbiting the established basis of inequity—of class—is one of the major projects of correcting for the Marxist analysis that class is the main focus of exploitation. This work also challenges assumptions that focusing on multiple marginalities, such as race, gender, and sexuality, creates

a distraction from the main source of conflict and contradiction—capitalism and class (Cho, 2013).

Questions of Gender and Othering

Key questions in critical theory include: Whose voice is present? Whose voice is missing? The alternative and free-school movement was not immune to this absence and othering. Maxine Greene (2000) cautions against presentism when reflecting upon the experiences of the past. This can present conflict for anyone looking back in time to navigate the blind spots in the actions of the activist educators. The challenge is to find a balance—to seek out the possibly extraordinary insights still impactful today, while observing and acknowledging the oversights. These oversights can be seen as holes, which may be glaring and deep in the light of the present. Do we step over these holes? Can we? Which insights do we take forward and what omissions do we forgive? How do we ensure we recognize our own social location in these questions?

Greene (2000) has noted that the free schools of the 1960s "scarcely noticed" the invisibility of women and African Americans. In the Community School story, I am motivated to share all of the student and teacher voices. The homogeneity of the population of the Community School reflected the homogeneity of the larger community from which the school drew. The school was small and consisted of all-white families who had relocated from urban American and Canadian environments, escaping their lives in cities for a different kind of life in the country. The particularities for each family in leaving their urban homes were unique—some came from wealthy families, while others came from families that were economically disadvantaged. The common theme was that they were all pushing for social change, for a more just world.

Parent-teachers in the school explored questions of gender roles and stereotypes, as well as injustices in the treatment of Indigenous peoples by the settler community through the lenses available to them in the 1970s—a vantage point similar to the time Greene refers to in her work. Sylvia, one of the parent-teachers, shared her memories of teaching about residential schools and Indigenous genocide:

> When your mom was teaching history, she used Buffy Sainte Marie—“My Country ’Tis of Thy People You’re Dying.” I will never forget this. She was detailing the injustices in Canada’s history. We were teaching that in our school way back in the ’70s before anyone was even looking at that as a reality. We’re still having trouble looking at it as a reality, but Kathy was very passionate about bringing that out into the open—the injustice and the native culture.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission would not come into existence until 2008; however, these conversations were being championed by the teachers in the Community School, who attempted to give space for understanding the marginalization/oppression/injustice of Indigenous peoples.

> Now that your big eyes are finally opened
>
> Now that you’re wondering, how must they feel?
>
> Meaning them that you’ve chased cross America’s movie screens
>
> Now that you're wondering, How can it be real?
>
> That the ones you’ve called colorful, noble and proud
>
> In your school propaganda
>
> They starve in their splendor
>
> You’ve asked for our comment, I simply will render

—Buffy Sainte-Marie, 1987, "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying"

I remember as a child, also learning about Indigenous ceremony. Our school travelled to a large community powwow to learn more about the history and culture of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Following this trip, the students created totems for themselves, with an animal of their choosing. I chose the groundhog and named it Teddy. As I look back at that particular learning, my current understanding of relationship and reconciliation casts a long shadow of discomfort. Cultural appropriation is defined as "the act of copying or using the customs and traditions of a particular group or culture, by somebody from a more dominant (= powerful) group in society" (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, n.d., para. 1).

The language of cultural appropriation would not be widely used until the 1980s. The lenses available to the teachers were the ones they used. According to Antoine et al. (n.d.), "it is most likely to be harmful when the source culture is a group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways (as with Indigenous Peoples), or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive or sacred" (p. 81). Sitting with my 2021 hindsight, I am cognizant of the dangers of presentism and deeply uncomfortable with the memory of adopting and naming totems. The school community did not create the totems in partnership with the Indigenous community. I continue with my learning and unlearning about the significance of the colonial history of Canada and the impacts on Indigenous peoples. In reflection and in conversation, I have come to believe that we attended the powwow in the spirit of reconciliation and learned about totems with a spirit of allyship, though those concepts would not become meaningful to me for many years.

In the Community School, the male: female ratio of teachers was one-to-one (Poff, 1979). Certainly, challenging the status quo was a part of the school's raison d'etre, and challenging

assumptions about stereotyped gender roles was a part of that, as evidenced by the matching activity explored in Chapter 1, where it was noted that "*the only person who learns a lesson in sexism is the parent-teacher* (Poff, 1979, p. 44, emphasis in original). Despite the concerns she addresses, looking back, Greene (2000) notes important areas of criticism of the mainstream: "It is hard to forget the perspectives opened on bureaucracy, top-down supervision, predetermined curricula" (p. 308). In the 1970s and 80s, feminist analysis of the relationship between women and schooling was influenced greatly by liberal feminism, with an emphasis on gender-role stereotyping (Weiler, 1988, p. 273), as suggested by Poff's (1979) exploration of women's and men's roles.

Weiler (1988) argues that liberal feminist influences have been important in terms of documenting sexism in texts and courses. They failed, however, to place schools and schooling into the wider social context. Challenging educators today to place their work and pedagogy in a wider context, hooks (1994) notes, "Most progressive professors are more comfortable striving to challenge class bias through the material studied than they are with interrogating how class biases shape conduct in the classroom and transforming their pedagogical process" (p. 140).

Weiler (1988) asserts that "while liberal feminist critiques of sex-role stereotyping in school texts and descriptions of classroom practices have been very useful, they are of limited analytic value in investigating the complexity of the social construction of gender in the intersection of school, family, and work" (p. 28). Interestingly, the women and men involved in the Community School were not only engaged in the interrogation of gender stereotypes, but also exploring those intersections and assumptions of society—both within schooling and within the greater community. This was in keeping with the times, as second-wave feminism was very strong at this time.

When looking through the retroactive lens of memory and analysis, it is challenging to avoid presentism—and to remember that the creators of the Community School could not have anticipated the thinking of the past 40 plus years—such as our current understanding of cultural appropriation, of reconciliation, and sexism.

Beyond Either/Or Thinking: Schools as Sites of Oppression and Liberation?

Some critical theorists see school as both a site of domination and one of liberation (McLaren, 2015). Here is where critical theorists can find the transformative potential of school. "School functions *simultaneously* as a way to empower students around issues of social justice and a way to sustain, legitimize, and reproduce dominant class interests directed at creating obedient, docile, and low-paid future workers" (p. 132). We can begin to see agency in students when they come to challenge the world they see before them. Not only are they critical of the social world, but they are also creators of it. "We do stand *before* the social world: we live *in the midst* of it" (McLaren, 2015, p. 133).

Returning to this dissertation's subject, members of the Community School movement were a part of a larger social movement, challenging the dominant social ideology, technocracy, and what were perceived to be the moral ills of society (Miller, 2002). Of the general free-school movement of the 1960s/1970s, Miller (2019b) argues that, while not perfect, it continues to resonate in the writing of holistic educators. "The Free School movement, like all human endeavors, contained its own flaws, excesses and blind spots, but it represented a serious effort to turn society away from the path of sprawling technocracy toward more democratic, holistic, person-centered values" (p. 12).

The school at the centre of this research was in keeping with holistic and critical principles, and as the people within it worked to create a holistic space for children, they

challenged the status quo of mainstream school and acted as critical pedagogues, though the language of critical theory was not available to them. In her writing about the 1960s, Maxine Greene (2000) observes that challenges to public and progressive education brought new ways of thinking, in which "echoes of Emersonianism were audible, a pleasant libertarianism, a touch of Rousseau, [and] certain aspects of Deweyan thought" (p. 308). Perhaps this romanticized notion of a pleasant libertarianism is reflected in the homogeneity of the population of the Community School families. White families, economically privileged or marginalized, may have been more likely to have the luxury to make the choice to become a part of a new community.

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I asked, Is there another way? Am I an intended reformer or a conscientious objector to mainstream schooling? Critical theorists continue to struggle with questions such as these. "By legitimizing the school system as just and meritocratic, as giving everyone the same opportunity for success, the dominant culture hides the truth of the hidden curriculum—the fact that those whom schooling helps most are those who come from the most affluent families" (McLaren, 2015, p. 142). The families of the Community School were challenging these assumptions of the just meritocracy of school. They were looking to find another way. Some found it in the Community School. Sylvia shared: "I didn't have to keep an alarm clock to get the kids out to the bus. All those things that were involved with the school system that didn't have anything to do whatsoever with education had been eliminated, you know. And it became easier."

Were they looking to change the world? Were they working against the mainstream-school system? According to at least one of the parent-teachers, absolutely. Again, Sylvia shared her thoughts: "I think for ourselves at that time, we were changing our world, because we didn't like the one we were living in. And by changing our world, we changed your world."

This journey back in time is allowing me to reflect on whether they did.

Chapter Five: Methodology

For though they may be parted

There is still a chance that they will see

There will be an answer, let it be

—Paul McCartney, 1970, "Let It Be"

Paul McCartney reflected on writing "Let It Be," and how he continues to feel his mother's presence in his life:

> In this dream twelve years [after her death], my mother appeared, and there was her face, completely clear, particularly her eyes, and she said to me very gently, very reassuringly: "Let it be." It was lovely. I woke up with a great feeling. It was really like she had visited me at this very difficult point in my life and gave me this message: Be gentle, don't fight things, just try and go with the flow and it will all work out. (McCartney, unknown date, as cited in Jang & Jang, 2009)

McCartney found comfort in his mother's presence in his dream. My mother passed away before I began my doctoral research, eight months after a Stage 4 pancreatic-cancer diagnosis. She helped me formulate much of my thinking about learning. Three of her grandchildren "sang her out," as had been her wish. My then 16-year-old daughter Grace sang "Let It Be" in some of my mother's last moments—and she sang it again at my mother's celebration of life. I continually find my mother conjuring herself in my research, the melody of "Let it Be" filtering through in moments of poignancy in this research and in my life.

Driving home from my first week of residency in the doctoral program, I was listening to readings. I became tired. No longer attending to the readings, I turned on the radio. My eyes instantly welled with tears as the unmistakable voice of Paul McCartney sang, "There will be an

answer, let it be," confirmation that she is still here, engaging in discourse, pushing my thinking, whispering her words of wisdom. I am continually reminded that "the stories people tell have a way of taking care of them" (as cited in Chambers, 2004, p. 1). It is through our stories that we can find our own truths—our passions, our priorities.

Narrative Inquiry

According to Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) view of narrative inquiry, it is "a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and re-storying as the research proceeds" (p. 4). This understanding recognizes the collaborative nature of this research. "The narrative of any life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. Because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out and share, narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others" (Kim, 2016, p. 8). In the case of this narrative inquiry, my understanding of the role of the Community School in my own life both impacts, and is impacted by, the shared stories of participants.

Narrative inquiry, with its deeply personal tradition, calls to me as I explore the early learning of the Community School days—my own experiences and those of other members of that particular school community. Narrative inquirers employ myriad methods and theoretical frameworks (Chase, 2018), drawing from disciplines across the continuum of qualitative research (Freeman, 2018).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) outline the long history of the use of narrative both within and outside of educational research. The common theme of storying human experience remains. Narrative researchers recognize the complexities of studying our own social lives, while also recognizing that complexity as one of the greatest strengths in this kind of research. "Social life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research social life, then we must embrace

a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 9). This deep, visceral connection to our stories carries their potency.

Art Bochner asserts that he wants "a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head; I want a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 213). Story moves us to understand and connect with one another. This researcher reflexivity will be a pervasive thread in this work. Narrative inquiry is both method and phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), where narrative researchers describe "lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p. 2).

Narrative and Autoethnography as Critical Methodology

I was wrestling with methodological choice, early in the research process when a fellow PhD student and I walked onto The Boat, a restaurant, discussing appreciative inquiry versus participatory action research, narrative inquiry, and autoethnography. We sat in the hot summer sun, overlooking Lake Nipissing, continuing our discussion, as the heartwarmingly and heart-wrenchingly familiar song came on the radio. Once again, my mother seemed to have been summoned at just the right time.

For though they may be parted
There is still a chance that they will see
There will be an answer, let it be
—Paul McCartney, 1970, "Let It Be"

And once again, I found myself listening to the Beatles, once again with tears in my eyes. Yes, Mom, I hear you. Autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Thank you.

Narrative inquiry and autoethnography use story to find meaning in our lives. "Story is a tool for making us whole; stories gather up the parts of us and put them together in a way that gives our lives greater meaning than they had before we told our story" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 4).

For many researchers, one of the calls of narrative inquiry is to further social change (Chase, 2018; Kim, 2016). Clandinin (2007), among others, challenges us to consider whether narrative research is about describing the world being researched (descriptive) or about changing the world (interventionist). "Does narrative inquiry set out to change the world as people engage in the process of narrative inquiry with their participants, or is it a more descriptive kind of inquiry?" (p. xv) For some, the answer is clear about narrative inquiry's call to facilitate social change. Kim (2016) asserts that

> the ultimate goal of doing research, in my humble opinion, no matter what research purposes we have for our individual research, is to make the world a better place or to improve the human condition to the extent that we breathe social justice just as we breathe air in our daily lives. (p. 237)

This understanding of narrative inquiry as a critical methodology connects seamlessly with critical theory. The telling of story also connects to the holistic nature of sharing the complexities of whole stories.

Narrative inquiry raises questions, which might not be raised in more traditional research. For Barone (2007) researcher-storytellers' purpose is not in finding certainty in regards to "correct perspectives on educational phenomena" but rather is to raise questions about existing policy and to "enrich an ongoing conversation . . . [where narrative is located] . . . at the exploratory edge of educational research" (p. 466). Through this research, I explore the ways in which members of the Community School learned differently than their counterparts in

mainstream schools. I am interested in their stories, memories, and recollections of this time—where they are similar and where they diverge.

Critical and holistic pedagogies invite us, along with a critical approach to narrative inquiry, to articulate conflicting cultural experiences. The parent-founders of this particular school were part of a larger alternative-school and societal movement and were critically engaged with the social movement of which they were a part, where

> radical critics were not concerned with improving schools or bolstering student achievement; rather their writings reflected a deep sense that the established system of schooling as such was an oppressive institution that thwarted young people's social, emotional, moral, and even intellectual development. (Miller, 2002, p. 39)

The originators of the Community School were not living and learning in a vacuum; they were familiar with critics of mainstream schooling, such as A. S. Neill, Ivan Illich, and George Dennison. The founder of the Community School worked closely with Dennison at the First Street School. Their calls for more freedom, student empowerment, and choice informed the decisions they made for their children.

John Van Maanen (2011) asserts that "the prose [of advocacy tales] is both moral and normative, taking up many causes, including anti-racist, profeminist, anticolonial, and environmental ones" (p. 171). Narrative inquirers often bring marginalized viewpoints to light in their work (Chase, 2018). In this inquiry, using narrative as a critical methodology holds space for those conversations, providing a voice to the Other viewpoints, which are a challenge to mainstream education. Van Maanen (2011), in the prologue to his influential work, *Tales of the Field*, addresses criticisms about bias and subjectivity in this kind of research head-on.

> The field and its approach, its concepts, its justifications were all being taken to task—by some of its most respected practitioners no less . . . for its unwarranted claims of objectivity, for its treacherous subjectivity, for its racial and gendered silences and partiality, for its failure to abandon the scientific posturing associated with modernism and essentialism, for its links to colonialism and the empire, and, most damning, for its inability (or unwillingness) to critically reflect on its own practices. (p. x)

While acknowledging that some critics may be disparaging of such open advocacy, Van Maanen (2011) argues that “ethnography has always served some groups better than others, and making this explicit in the text is well established—if infrequently promoted or practiced” (p. 172). My research has furthered my own thinking about learning and living through this advocacy tale. This is not dispassionate research, and I feel it is far better to state this than to deny it.

In this tradition, Chase (2018) sees one of the strengths of narrative inquiry in “exploring lived experience through a focus on personal narratives, often revealing aspects of lives previously hidden from or suppressed by social science” (p. 557). My own undergraduate and graduate background in anthropology and women’s studies makes these critiques feel familiar, and apt, as feminist scholars have been making these same calls for change for many years.

Methods

Narrative inquirers are bricoleurs, drawing upon a diversity of materials, where bricolage can be seen as methodological, theoretical, or interpretive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The understanding that qualitative researchers use many methods and methodologies is not new to social sciences. Denzin and Lincoln addressed this in their first *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), when they stated that the “combination of multiple methodological practices,

empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry" (p. 5). They further this conversation in the fifth *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, where they offer,

> "The solution (bricolage) which is the result of the bricoleur's method is a [emergent] construction" (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991, p. 161), which changes and takes new forms as different tools, methods, and techniques of representation and interpretation are added to the puzzle. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 11)

My methods are eclectic and have evolved through the research process, understanding, along with Conle (2000) that "methods of narrative inquiry, rather than being externally defined, emerge out of the inquiry activities. They are not as much means to an end as they are part of the ends achieved" (p. 201).

Strategies such as member checking and prolonged engagement can work to maintain reflexivity during qualitative research (Berger, 2015). Due to lifetime relationships among the students and teachers, I already have had prolonged engagement with members of the school; through this research, many of those relationships were re-established and re-ignited. I hope their stories will ensure that the alternative approaches to learning in the Community School become meaningful outside of my own experiences. Research through narrative focuses on the experiences of living and learning together. Narrative inquiry, as a "profoundly relational" practice (Clandinin, 2007, p. xvi), is a perfect fit for this project.

"We are called on to make sense of and remember the past in order to move ahead and attend to the future. Thus, time, memory, and narrative are inextricably linked" (Bochner & Riggs, 2018, p. 196). We write about our memories and experiences in retrospect. By centring the memories of participants of the study, including my own, I have attempted to create

"multiple layers of reflection"—or a layered account (Ronai, 1992, p. 103), which will create a "juxtaposition between the author's experience and relevant literature" (Kim, 2016, p. 209) along with the experiences of participants.

Narrative inquiry uses story to find meaning in our lives, in which "story is a tool for making us whole; stories gather up the parts of us and put them together in a way that gives our lives greater meaning than they had before we told our story" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 4). This is the first time memories and stories of members of the school community will be compiled. By connecting and sharing our individual stories, I hope to share some of the ways that individual members were impacted by that early learning—and ways in which we are still being impacted today.

Narrative inquirers combine the intellectual realm of research with the aesthetic realm of story, as they become "researcher-storytellers" (Barone, 2007, p. 466). Similarly, Conle (2000) sees this kind of research as "belonging to more than one realm—as being an artistic endeavor as well as an intellectual inquiry" (p. 191). In keeping with this approach to writing, I take inspiration from Carolyn Ellis (2004) who aims to think like an ethnographer and write like a novelist. This weaving of story appeals to me, where I aim to create a coherent story full of verisimilitude, replete with plot and characters, sharing the sense of place and space.

I have attempted to write with an emphasis on relationships: between the author and the text, between the reader and the participants in the research. I take into account the whole person (body, mind, spirit, and emotion) when crafting the story, which speaks from a situated location; it is my job as the writer to articulate the wholeness and complexity of experience. I hope, dear reader, that you find I have done so!

Participants

The school community is small and access to participants was made through ongoing personal connections, including both parent-teachers and students. I consider all participants as intimate others, as we learned, played, and frequently stayed overnight together at each other's homes as a part of the school schedule. Lines between school and play were often blurred, and relationships established during those school days have endured for the many years that have followed. Community members who have relocated outside of the close geographic area have retained some connections with other members of the school community. I initially reached out to potential participants with whom I have contact through personal email and cellular connections. I reached out to other potential participants through an existing Facebook group, "Killaloe Community School—the 70s version" which was created by a former student. Members of the school community have shared contacts and a few photos from the "school days"; however, this group is largely inactive. Finally, I invited participants to share my research questions and information with other former students and teachers, using snowball sampling, where "participants or informants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study" (Mack & Woodsong, 2005, p. 6). This allowed me to reconnect with members of the school community with whom I no longer have personal connections.

Some members of the community have remained in social contact and continued to learn and live together. Several students went on to mainstream K–12 schooling, while others continued to learn outside of mainstream schools. Some went on to postsecondary education, while others never attended formal schooling of any kind. At least two teacher-parents and three

students (including myself) went on to become educators in mainstream schooling after the school closed.

Several members of the community have passed away in the years since the school closed. While questions regarding their place in the research are addressed in the ethics section, parts of their stories will be included where possible, as their contributions were key in the creation/development of the Community School. I am interested in all of the diversity of experience and memory.

There were 12 participants in the study (including myself). Eight were former students and four were former parent-teachers. Five of the eight students interviewed were female and three were male. Of the four teachers interviewed, three were women. Although not formally a part of the study, my mother's (Kathlyn) and Barney's published writing about the school contributed significantly to the research.

Confidentiality

The "Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans" states that "in disseminating findings, researchers shall not disclose identifiable information without the consent of participants" (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 64). Given that information about the school and its members has been published in at least two articles (*Natural Life* and *Growing Without Schooling*) where several of the students were named, I could not make promises of confidentiality. The publications were shared with participants to ensure they understood the possibility of being identified by readers of the research. I invited participants to choose to use their own names or to use pseudonyms with an understanding that, even with pseudonyms, they may be identifiable in the text. Participants unanimously chose to use their actual names, rather than pseudonyms.

Interviews

Interviews became the primary source for the collection of memories and stories. Interviews were dialogic, semi-structured, and made up of a mixture of planned questions and informal conversation. I also gathered artifacts, such as photos and documents, where possible. Interviews were conversational in nature, with guidance from the questions I had formulated, and focused on the memories of, and impressions of importance to, the individual participants. In the collaborative conversations, we shared impressions and stories between the researcher and participant, rather than having a traditional interview with scripted questions and answers.

Interviews were expected to take about 90 minutes; however, often they lasted longer as participants shared stories and memories openly. I had hoped that interviews could take place in-person, but restrictions in place due to COVID-19 made it impossible for this to occur. Interviews were recorded instead, and later, they were transcribed. The silver lining was that interviews could be completed with participants from various regions of the province as well as one international participant.

Participants were also invited to participate in group conversations to share their own stories and memories with each other. In these group discussions, I shared my own memories and impressions with participants, as learning and living together was a shared experience. I see this collaborative sharing as enriching to the process.

> The researcher's story is important in its own right, not as a tactic. The stories play off each other. You learn more by interacting with each other where all participants have time to add to or change their stories than in a one-shot deal where the interviewer simply gets the first and, in many cases, superficial story. (Ellis, 2004, p. 65)

Individuals were audio-recorded and transcribed; however, if any participant was uncomfortable with being recorded, I was prepared to continue without audio documentation. This was not necessary. Semi-structured interviews with planned questions allow the researcher to gather specific information from all of the respondents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) while allowing other topics of importance to the participants to be explored.

Planned questions were based on a holistic understanding of mind, body, spirit, and emotions, and worked to explore who benefited from the choices of the adults and the children, and who did not. In interpretive qualitative interviewing, many traditional assumptions are re-imagined. While the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee cannot be explained or imagined away, I aimed to be as reciprocal as possible with participants, while recognizing the risk of an asymmetrical power relationship between interviewer and participant (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 588). Interviews in such research allows "participants . . . to participate meaningfully in the interview, with little, if any, distinction between interviewer and interviewee" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 86).

Sample Questions

I designed interview questions as provocations for memories, encouraging participants to remember what it felt like to be a member of the school community. See Appendix A for a list of sample questions.

Ethics and Consent

Ethical guidelines are at the foundation of the work. Obtaining consent followed the requirements outlined in the "Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans" (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018). This includes plain-language invitations and explanations of the purpose of the research, as well as the understanding of consent as an

ongoing process, which may be withdrawn by participants at any time (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 28).

One former teacher provided me with her personal journals and several artifacts of student work from the time that the school was in operation; these chronicled her own experiences in the school at the time and reflected the thought process of one educator in the moment.

Data collected throughout the duration of the interview process was stored on my personal computer and iPhone device, which is where it was recorded. Once the final draft of the dissertation has been completed, all copies of interviews will be deleted, unless explicit permission has been given to store the data for future research purposes.

As with any qualitative research, participants may uncover unexpected revelations, thus a "description of all reasonably foreseeable risks and potential benefits, both to the participants and in general that may arise from research participation" (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 39) was included. Resources were made available for accessing services such as therapy services in the event that participants may require them.

I invited all participants to review the material and to confirm my depiction is representative of their views and experiences, through ongoing member-checking and prolonged engagement with participants. I view consent as "dynamic and ongoing, one that persists for the life of a project (Adams et al., 2015, p. 57). As outlined in Article 3.3 of the "Tri-Council Policy Statement," researchers "have an ongoing duty to provide participants with all information relevant to their ongoing consent to participate in the research" (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 33). The Nipissing University Research Ethics Board (NUREB) guides research conducted and "balances respect for research and academic freedom with the necessity of protecting the

participants" (Nipissing University, n.d., p. 1). Interestingly, few of the participants wished to review either their interview transcripts or the sections of the dissertation that referred to them or to their memories.

I have completed the Introductory Tutorial for the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). NUREB's core principles, "respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice" (p. 1) guided the research throughout the lifetime of this project.

Narrative Privilege

Some founders of the school have passed away since the school closed, including my own parents. It is important that their voices also be present in the research, along with all members of the school community. Their passing does not preclude the importance of their presence in the story. Ethical dilemmas remain when writing about people who have died—including whose stories to tell and how to tell them. In some cases, it is understood that their stories might raise the poignancy of the stories for readers including intimate others, who will be reading the researcher's and participants' interpretations of the deceased. The holder of the pen has no more access to truth than does the reader; however, they *do* have the privileged position of deciding which stories they will tell and how they will tell them. I continue to work to mediate this writer's privilege through strategies such as member checking and ongoing-process consent.

Mark Freeman (2018) invites us to recognize that all stories are "irrevocably partial, incomplete" (p. 136). He recognizes that the stories we tell are not the only stories or the only way to tell them. It is "but one of the many possible stories and will offer but one inroad, one path into this life. . . . The possibilities are, literally, endless" (p. 136). For Freeman, telling story— in his case, his mother's—"in full measure—the highs, the lows, and everything in-

between" (p. 136) is not only a primary task but also a primary responsibility. This acknowledgment of narrative responsibility and privilege is a hallmark of this kind of research. I am driven to remember that "no matter how hard we try to deny it we are still operating within an environment where the ethic prevails that those who are published are experts and those who are written about are not" (Ribbens, 1989, p. 76). I am compelled to be vigilant about who I might privilege, who I might hurt, and who I might silence in the telling of any story.

As a participant in the research, I interviewed others as well as myself. I asked myself similar questions in a self-interview and included my stories as I would any other member of the school community. As is suggested by Bochner and Ellis (2016) when interviewing others, I attempted to weave my story "as a researcher with related experience, in and out of others' tales" (p.187). This priority, of gathering the sense of the experience, was the focus of the interviews. As with Carolyn Ellis (2004), my "emphasis is less on getting an accurate story . . . than it is on creating a meaningful story as we interact with each other" (p. 65).

Memory

The work of the researcher is to liaise between the stories and memories of participants and the reader of the text. Bochner (2013) asserts the "burden of the autoethnographer is [to] make meaning of all the stuff of memory and experience—how it felt then and how it feels now" (p. 54). I hope to move fluidly between the voices of the protagonists of that early education and the languages of critical and holistic theory—merging story and theory so story becomes "theory in action" (Adams et al., 2015). "Narrative is in a time machine that transcends time and space (Kim, 2016, p. 8), where "we understand our own lives in terms of narratives that we live out and share, [thus] narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others" (p. 8). It is with this

narrative goal—to make sense of our shared human experiences—that I hope to use storytelling to allow our collected stories to become more than individual, discrete experiences.

My mother's writing about the Community School in *Natural Life* magazine evoked the feeling of place and time and I hope to build on her work in my own writing. My research is reminiscent, with an understanding that in their recollection, stories change and new views emerge. "Our personal narratives and autoethnography are works of memory, stories about the past, and all such stories are made, not found" (Bochner, 2016, p. 200).

Memory is fallible; it fades, adjusts, and distorts our experiences. In our recollections we are not purposefully dishonest; however, like Giorgio (2013), I understand that "memory as an investigative tool is complex and at times unruly" (p. 411). Researchers begin with memory but end with story, understanding that "memory and story are not the same things. We remember details of an event as moments; when we write, we thread those remembered moments to make sense of the experience" (p. 410). In weaving together the stories of my fellow community/free schoolers, I hope to create a coherent picture of the school days. However, I find resonance with Bud Goodall (2000), who as though reaching into my thoughts, so eloquently stated, "I am still learning how to find a balance between the story of life as I have lived it and the stories of others' lives that have been spoken into existence, within and against mine" (p. 24).

Artifacts

Memories are at the forefront of the research. Artifacts such as the *Natural Life* article, school newsletters, and student newspapers (*This School!* and *The Bugle)* were used as provocations for participants' memories. One personal journal was provided by a parent-teacher, which was written while she was teaching. This journal provided context for stories shared in

interviews. Few photos of the school years were brought forward during interviews. Those that were located have been used in the body of the text.

Thematizing and Characterizing (Data Analysis)

Adams et al. (2015) encourage researchers to "notice the characters that appear and reappear in your stories" (p. 77). Not all characters will tell the same story that I do. And I do not want to silence dissenting voices, such as former students who may be critical of their experiences in the school. Recognizing it may be uncomfortable to share negative experiences, I purposefully hold space for those stories. Adams et al.'s (2015) work, which understands that "characters and the relationships and meanings they create constitute the soul of good autoethnographic writing" (p. 78), inspires me.

In creating the story of the Community School, I looked for recurring themes to identify and explore. Many of the students shared memories of particular events or activities that loomed larger than other memories, such as shared reminiscences about the beaver pond, meditation, and yoga.

Interviewees included former students who transitioned between free and mainstream school, Community School students and parent-teachers who went on to become teachers in mainstream schooling, and students who never entered formal mainstream schooling at all. In each case, while I am interested in exploring their tales individually, it will be as a means to tell of the diversity of experience of the whole school. Stories were shared and all participants elected to use their real identities in the text.

Sharing the Research

Members of the broader back-to-the-land movement are currently working to document the story of the community in the geographic area where the Community School operated. I will

share my research about the school so it may become a part of that larger project, ensuring the experiences of community members be documented and shared.

The reciprocal nature of the research relationship invites the researcher to share the stories with the participants of the research. In keeping with the spirit of the "Tri-Council Policy Statement" (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018), I will make the research available to participants as well as members of the broader school and geographic community.

Insider Status and Reflexivity

In this kind of qualitative research, the researcher does not explain away their connection to the research; by embracing the messiness, researchers find their place in the text. As a former student, I draw on my own memories as well as those of other participants, former students, and parent-teachers. I now work as a principal in mainstream education, so my insider status is two-fold, as a former student in the Community School and an adult educator in mainstream schooling. Being an insider is akin to simultaneously being an onlooker and a member of the cast (Berger, 2015).

My insider status allows a unique perspective from which to share the Community School story. For Denzin (1997), "Messy texts make the writer a part of the writing project. These texts, however, are not just subjective accounts of experience; they attempt to reflexively map the multiple discourses that occur in a social space" (p. 225). I embrace my insider status as a part of a holistic understanding of my research process. Berger (2015) identifies the strength of insider research.

> Being self-reflective helps the researcher to identify questions and content that he or she tends to emphasize or shy away from and to become aware of their own reactions to interviews, thoughts, emotions, and their triggers. . . . It helps in alerting oneself to

"unconscious editing" . . . and thus enable[s] further engagement with the data and more in-depth comprehensive analysis of it. (pp. 221–222)

Bergers's (2015) understanding that "no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher" (p. 229) informs her practice, and she identifies strategies to employ in order to ensure a continual reflexive position throughout a research project. I have used many of the strategies identified by Berger, such as prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation (crystallization).

Reflexivity also ensures we explicitly acknowledge our research in terms of power relationships. To Bernadette Calafell (2014), reflexivity means, "skillfully and artfully recreating the details of lived experiences and one's space or implication in control, contradiction, and privilege" (as cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 29). I want to ensure I hold space for those members of the school who may wish to share their own, diverging reflections of their school experience. This is not only my story to tell; I hope I have shared a fulsome story of the school and its participants.

Hearing and Sharing Multiple Voices

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) recognize the writing process and the written product as deeply intertwined. As the authors state, "The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing" (p. 962). In the act of writing, researchers come to know more about their research and more about themselves. Like Richardson and St. Pierre, I believe that "language constructs one's subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific" (p. 961).

Meaning making is dependent upon the experiences and discourses available to the writer and their ability to communicate experience. Powerful connections are made through story, for

story is fundamentally human, connecting, and relationally driven. When the writer/researcher is personally connected to the topic, as I am in this case, those connections have the potential to be more powerful.

For Brady (2005), "What distinguishes the best of this writing . . . is the extent to which expositions on odors, sounds, and tastes are treated as intrinsic to the ethnographic message rather than extraneous" (p. 999). This is a daunting task, choosing perfect words to evoke the senses of those long-ago school days. For example, when writing about a walk to the barn for a riding lesson, I might describe the feeling of the grass beneath our feet as we cross the field into the barnyard; the dust rising around us like the dust around Pigpen from Charlie Brown comics; the sound of chickens running and squawking as the children pass through their domain; the smell of leather saddles; or the feel of the rough unravelling baler twine in our hands, which we used as makeshift reins. As writers, we struggle with words inadequate to re-story the experiences of everything; we can be frustrated, knowing that our words cannot become the experience.

> Poets want to stretch the limits of language, to wring everything possible out of words and metaphoric processes, ultimately to reach beyond the shortcomings of language in the landscapes of literature, speech, the sublime, and the ineffable and then pass on the whole bundle to all who will listen. They want to work . . . where the "back of the throat and the back of the mind" answer and support each other. (Brady, 2005, p. 999)

Through storytelling, we claim and reclaim our experiences and our stories. Like Van Maanen, Bochner (2013) understands personal narrative to be an author's interpretation of experience, not a reflection of that experience. The "truth" of these narratives is not a stable truth—the past is always open to revision. Memory is dynamic, imperfect, and ever changing.

> When we write stories from our past, we necessarily engage in narrative smoothing, polishing and moralizing and we risk, as Hacking (1995, p. 254) warns, that "the colors with which we paint (may not have existed) when the episode occurring in the scenes actually occurred." (Bochner, 2016, p. 206)

When I was 7 years old, my parents enrolled me and my sister in mainstream school and I left the Community School. They felt it was important for us to spend time in the mainstream system, so we would be able to successfully function in mainstream society. Though I left at a young age (entering mid-way through Grade 1), my visceral memory holds space for what those early learning experiences *felt* like, rather than being able to recall *facts* about them. For Carolyn Ellis (2016) this is about staying "true to the meaning" of experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 171). Similarly, Polkinghorne (2007) observes "'truths' sought by narrative researchers are 'narrative truths,' not 'historical truths' (Spence, 1982, p. 479). Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories" (p. 479).

This research focuses on memories and feelings of those early learning experiences, to explore holistically, in mind, body, spirit, and emotion, what it felt like for participants to live and learn in that environment. Narrative, at its base, is the study of experience as story, and thus provides the perfect vehicle for this journey.

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

In sharing multiple lived experiences, I have attempted to create thick descriptions and create an understanding of participants' experiences. "After all, as researchers, we are interested in exploring and understanding the experiences that have salience in our lives, whether these experiences thrill, surprise, intrigue, sadden, or enrage us" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 22). Through the experiences of loss and grief at the passing of my parents, I have found myself looking back over the learning of my early childhood and its impacts on me as an educator today.

The excitement of words, reaching for the perfect phrase to gather your thoughts—that quiet contemplation is necessary to craft and articulate the "just right" phrases to capture the elusive and complex thoughts we all wish to express. Annie Dillard tells us that the one thing she knows about writing is that you have to give it everything you've got. "Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, right away, every time . . . give it, give it all, give it now" (Dillard, 1989, p. 78).

Sometimes, the blank page is like a blank canvas before an artist puts brush to it. In a word, terrifying. But, we have to jump in, ready or not, and "give it all." That is much easier if you believe that inherent in the process of writing is the process of analyzing and refining our ideas (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). I do not want to be the only voice in the telling of the story of the school as it is not only my story and meaning that I am seeking. Yet, I am an insider, and that clearly is a part of my truth.

I understand truth as partial and identity as fluid (Guba & Lincoln, p. 203) and I know this kind of work can lead to "messy texts" (Guba & Lincoln, p. 211). It is through our stories that we can find our own truths—our passions, our priorities. I hope that in sharing our stories, the Community School will help us make sense of our own lives.

Chapter Six: The Newcomers

Watercolor artists use wet wash to blur and blend, where "the final effect will appear a bit softer and more ethereal than a dry flat wash" (Abrahamsen, 2019, "Wet Flat Wash" section, para. 2). I sit with this metaphor to my writing as I wonder: In these stories, where should my voice come in to connect the dots? How do I choose when to render the dusty stories into a kaleidoscope of brightly shifting colours and if, when the stories are too hot to touch, to wet wash them instead? How can I be "true" to the stories, the relationships, and the experiences of all members of the school community and honour the multi-voiced conflicting and ambiguous stories. Rendering truth—is that possible? Is that even the goal? There were no dark secrets revealed, no allegations of misconduct. There *were* deeply held convictions that led to relationship factures and interpersonal challenges. In my commitment to sharing and preserving the history of the Community School, my aim is to maintain relationships, not to damage them.

Context—What Brought the Adults Here

The creators of the Community School came from many and varied backgrounds In this chapter, I explore some of their motivations: What brought these newcomers here? What disparate experiences resulted in the arrival of these people in that shared space, in that shared time? In a later chapter, I will explore the "kids'" perspectives of their experiences and of the how the school influenced them. Here, I will explore what experiences and ideas led the "adults" to create the school in the first place.

As I write, the school community is navigating grief and loss—the first of the kids from the early school days has unexpectedly passed away at 53 years of age; the feeling of loss is profound. Many of us came together for the funeral after having not seen each other in several years. As we came together to grieve and honour a life, I felt connected to everyone present.

Much as every time I sit down to gather and share stories with any member of the Community School, the intimacy returns; all of the years that have come between us fall away. Throughout this research, I have been immersed in those childhood learning and living experiences and memories and now I feel an urgency to honor the legacy and the time.

So, we turn now to the beginning. In the 1960s and 1970s, many new families moved to the rural area of Ontario where the school would come to be established. This area had been largely populated by Polish and Irish families who had immigrated to Canada in the 1800s. The population had been stable for many years. The influx of "newcomers," often called hippies by the local community, came with very different lifestyles and perspectives. As was my understanding growing up, and confirmed through interviews, these newcomers moved from urban areas in search of new lifestyles and cheap land and open spaces on which to garden and raise families. Many were American draft resisters; others were simply escaping the pace and expectations of urban life. It was out of this population that the Community School would emerge.

I interviewed parent-teachers from the Community School and invited them to share their memories about how and why they came to the area and how they came to be involved in the Community School. Unless otherwise indicated, the information came from those interviews.

The school's founder, Barney, and my mother, Kathlyn, have both passed away in the days since the Community School ceased operation, so I was unable to interview them for this research. Both were involved at the inception of the school. I am able to share their stories from their own published writings and through the memories of members of the school community, including my own. Several parent-teachers who might have been research participants, including

my father, have also passed away. Their stories are included where possible and where relevant, through the memories of family, friends, and fellow community members.

By introducing their stories in this chapter, I hope to provide some context for the establishment of the school. Next, in Chapter 7, I will explore in greater depth the political and philosophical underpinnings that influenced the school's founders and school decisions. In Chapter 8, I will share the memories and stories as shared by the "kids" in the school. The educational and philosophical section (Chapter 7) can be understood as the *why* of the school. The stories and memories of the then kids (Chapter 8) will share the *how*—how the philosophical approaches played out in the school's day-to-day activities. Finally, in Chapter 9, I will attempt to weave together the voices of the adults and children (including my own) and share our reflections looking back at our school experience.

Barney—Community School Founder, Where It Began

In the 1970s and 1980s, founders and educators Barney McCaffrey and my mother Kathlyn Lampi (Poff)[1] wrote and published stories about the Community School in numerous newspapers and magazines. They were proud of what the school was accomplishing, and they wanted to share their feelings of success with the larger community. Many of the topics raised in their articles echo in the stories of the students and parent-teachers in my recent interviews.

Barney McCaffrey was a qualified teacher and had taught in traditional school environments before co-founding the Community School. His résumé would include teaching positions in Central America and the United States, in urban environments such as Detroit and New York City, and in rural communities in Ontario, Canada. Barney set out to challenge and change traditional ideas about how to educate children by sharing the success of our small

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[1] My mother, Kathlyn Lampi wrote under her married name, Poff, in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s she began writing under her maiden name, Lampi.

Community School. He wanted to show that education does not need to occur in a traditional classroom with mandated curriculum. Community and sharing were of utmost importance.

For the decades preceding his death, Barney was a renowned storyteller, gathering the stories of local history. He encouraged people to explore and share their roots so they could better know themselves. I hope Barney would appreciate the storytelling approach to this Community School research, as we collectively explore and come to know how the school influenced us. Perhaps along the way, we will come to better know ourselves. Barney wrote about the Community School with an aim to share one model of alternative school.

When I sat down to interview participant Gabriel, one of Barney's sons, he shared stories about his Dad's past, as well as his own experiences and memories of his childhood in the Community School. Additional information comes from the memories of other research participants, and from a submission Barney made to *Growing Without Schooling*, in which he provided updates about the school.

Barney, the founder of the Community School, was new to the geographical area when he and his family moved in 1969, but he was not new to education or to educational reform. Barney brought with him myriad educational experiences. He taught at the alternative First Street School in New York City with George Dennison. Gabriel remembers the story of his dad meeting the Dennisons: "I know he met Mabel Dennison somewhere on the street, it must have been in New York City, and it went from Mabel to George Dennison. She had a kid in one arm, and something else in the other. And the story goes—on it went from there." Barney was hired and he taught music at the First Street School, visiting the school three times a week, playing guitar and autoharp, and teaching the children folk songs (Dennison, 1969).

Gabriel shared that Barney later worked as a high-school teacher in Detroit. He was sent into Detroit city schools during the riots of 1968 to play music and try to calm the waters. Upon arrival to the rural area where the Community School would be established, he taught for a while in the local high school.

When his children were of school age, his disillusionment with mainstream education led the family back to alternative schooling. Barney and his wife, Pat, decided that they could do a better job themselves, outside of the mainstream. When sharing an update about the school in *Growing Without Schooling*, Barney asserted that "the kids were away, eight hours a day, five days a week, and they didn't seem to be learning much in all that time" (as cited in Farenga, 2011, p. 9). Gabriel shared that his father, Barney, wanted to open a school to provide different kinds of learning opportunities for his own children.

At that time, participant and former parent-teacher Sylvia explains, the process of opening a school was very straightforward. "You had to fill out a form. All you had to have to start a school was five students. You didn't even need to give their names. And you had to have a principal. At one point, Barney was the principal and at some other point, Pat was the principal."

Other parent-teachers would come to be listed as principal, taking turns for the paperwork, which was the only unique role the principal played in the school (Sylvia). Barney's family was not large enough to create the school alone, so he reached out to my mother. My sister, Rebecca, takes the story from there, recalling the story told by our mother:

> Barney wanted to have a Community School and he needed enough people to be able to register it. I forget the number . . . but whatever it was, it was more than the number of kids he had in his family. So he went around looking for kids and he asked my mother if I would like to be in the Community School . . . so that is how it started.

For some, the school would come to be known as “Barney’s School.” However, the McCaffrey family was only one of several families that made the decision to break away from the mainstream schooling system and establish the Community School. More families would come to be involved in the school, drawing from the growing number of newcomers to the area who were similarly disillusioned with mainstream schooling.

His ideas were influenced by Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society,* a text that he frequently encouraged other parent-teachers to read. Barney and his family, like so many of the newcomers, lived an alternative lifestyle outside of school as well, embracing an ethos of anti-materialism and ecological activism. Some of the family’s choices were a little unconventional, even for the time. Sylvia remembers when Barney set up a wringer washing machine and connected it to a bicycle. “If Pat wanted to do the laundry, she would use that stationary bicycle and pedal like crazy. She would nervously laugh about it. She’d say, ‘try that on a hill in the summer.’ But whatever it was, everybody was experimenting with things like that in those days.” The school was a natural extension of that experimentation.

Barney’s children attended the Community School or were homeschooled for nearly the entirety of their education. I recall that one of the children opted to try out mainstream school. He lived with our family while he attended for a short time. He returned to live with his own family after a few months and returned to learning outside of the mainstream.

Kathlyn—My Mother—and Dennis—My Father

Like Barney, my mother was a storyteller and a writer. Like Barney, she and my father were co-founders of the school. However, during the operating years of the school, she wrote articles for newspapers and magazines, sharing her experiences and those of other members of the school community. Her writing helps paint a picture of the setting of our school days.

My mother's writing career would continue, and in later years, she gathered and wrote life stories, with her understanding that "nobody's life is ordinary" (Lampi, 2009). She honoured people through narrative. I believe she, too, would smile to hear the stories of the Community School gathered now. Through the lens of her published writing, I am able to share my mother's voice, and I am so grateful to bring her perspectives into the conversation.

My parents both passed away before I began formal research into the Community School. I was unable to interview either of them. However, my mother's writing, my sister's and my own memories, as well as the recollections of other participants in the research, have been brought together to share their story.

My parents were living in Toronto, where they were working as young, upcoming professional writers, on track for successful careers. However, like many other members of the school community, they moved from an urban area, relocating to raise their children and live a different kind of life. While my father was Toronto born and bred, my mother grew up in rural Northern Ontario, near Sudbury. One morning, while reading *The Globe and Mail*, my father saw that a local weekly newspaper was up for sale. By the time I was born, they had bought into the paper and left the city for a place where my mother could once more smell the trees, which she frequently told us she had missed so much.

Like many other newcomers, my parents remained and continued to live in the community following the school closure. As a career writer, my mother wrote articles for national newspapers and magazines about the Community School (among other things), sharing her passion for writing, learning, and disrupting. Barney reached out to her and she agreed to have her daughter try out the Community School—my sister began to attend at age 3. It would be a while before I would join my older sister, but we both started our early education in the

Community School. Our mother later reached out and invited other members of the newcomer community to join the school.

We each began our Community School years when we were three years old, Rebecca first, then me four years later, when I was old enough. I left the Community School permanently nearly four years later when I entered public school late in Grade 1. Rebecca attended public school briefly for a part of her Grade 1 year, then returned to the Community School until Grade 6. We both remained in the public-school system for the rest of our elementary- and high-school years. Both of us, as well as several other Community School students, would be accelerated when we joined the mainstream system, skipping a grade in recognition of the academic strength we brought with us from the Community School. My mother's passion for disruption continued throughout her life, and she remained involved in the community as an activist and an organizer.

Our parents made the decisions about our education together. While my mother was the driving force regarding decisions about our educational path, together they decided to enrol us first in the Community School and later in a mainstream school. They both articulated that they felt it was important for us to learn how to function in society as it was, not as it might be. Our parents divorced when I was about 7 years-old, about the same time as they enrolled my sister and me into mainstream school. We might have been moved to mainstream school, in part, in an effort to ensure we had some stability amidst the separation. As my father did not publish written material about the school, I am not able to share his reflections with as much detail as I am my mother's recollections. I wish that were otherwise.

I have shared how "Let it Be" filters into my thinking and how poignant this has been for me, as it helps me feel connected with my mother. I also remember my father's passion for music, especially for the Beatles. We would listen to his albums on the turntable, with the

Beatles in constant rotation. Every Saturday evening, he would sit us down and tune in to *Finkleman's 45s* on CBC radio. I can hear the opening jazz riff and the host opening the show with his trademark, "Hello everyone, I'm Danny Finkleman … for the next two hours, more of that wonderful music from the 50s, 60s, and early 70s especially for you" (*Finkleman's 45s Last Show*) and his hand-printed playlists. My mother's voice finds its way easily into the text. That is the way it was in our lives, as well. My father was always more quiet, less explicit in sharing his convictions. His influence on my thinking continues as well.

As we will see in other participants' stories, decisions around when to enter mainstream school, or whether to do it at all, differed among the parent-teachers, as did the ease with which kids transitioned between the two school systems. We will explore the children's experiences in more detail in later sections.

Sylvia

Sylvia moved as a young adult to the area from her hometown of Toronto—and never looked back. As was the case with many newcomers to the area, she was drawn by the allure of cheap land and open spaces to grow vegetables and raise children. Like Barney's family, Sylvia's family was already living an alternative lifestyle before becoming involved in the school. It was about shopping less, making more. Sylvia grew most of her family's food in her extensive garden, baked their bread, and prioritized buying only what was absolutely necessary. This was in common with many of the newcomer families. Sylvia shared: "We were already reducing our carbon footprint, if you want to call it that, back then."

When her children were of school age, she enrolled them in the local public school. She hoped school would provide opportunities for her children to learn, socialize, and make friends. She became disillusioned when she drove by the school hoping to see her daughter playing with

her new friends at recess. Instead, she found her daughter sitting alone, isolated beside the fence, while other children played nearby. The last straw for Sylvia, however, was the way that she saw the teachers treating her kindergarten daughter's regression in toilet training.

> When she started school, she wasn't peeing her pants. She was already trained, she wasn't wetting the bed, she had no problem. She started doing it when she started public school. And the way they were treating it, a teacher actually said to her, when she asked to go to the washroom, "all you little girls ever want to do is go and check your hair." That was a very major thing for me. It was standing in lines and sticking your hand up. I thought it was really undignified to have to ask permission to go pee.

Sylvia was outraged by her daughter's treatment and when she told my mother, and that's when "recruiting" began. Sylvia's family, living back in the city, was very critical of her decision to join the Community School, but she was undeterred. She wanted something different for her children, "I got all kinds of nasty stuff from my family about it. How I was ruining their lives and I was gonna burn in hell for making this choice. Stuff like that, you know. It didn't matter, I didn't believe them."

Sylvia's children remained in the Community School for most of their elementary years. At one point, the children decided they wanted to return to mainstream school. Sylvia felt it was important for them to make their own decisions; however, she insisted that if they were going to enrol in public school, that they would remain for the school year. "I said, 'Okay, but I don't want you to make us look bad in the community. So, if you opt for the public school, you have to stay for the entire year. You can't just come home and say I don't like it.' At the end of that year, they changed their minds; they did go back to the alternative school." Both kids remained in the Community School until they entered mainstream high school.

Sylvia now looks back at the Community School years without regret, though that was not always the case. She saw that the choices made by parents sometimes made it difficult for the Community School kids to "fit in" to the mainstream community.

> I look at them now and realize that I raised my kids to think for themselves. They didn't have to spew out what somebody else told them they had to. They learned, and they're both independent people that can think. So ultimately, now down the line, I don't feel bad about it. I did sometimes, but I don't anymore.

Several parent-teachers and former students shared the same reflection—that the Community School kids struggled to find their place in the mainstream community, that many of the long-standing local residents saw them as "other."

Bernadine

Bernadine and her partner came to the area as a move towards the kind of life they wanted to lead. As Bernadine shared her memories and experiences, it quickly became clear that she did not begin to question mainstream education only upon her arrival to the area. For her, that began with her own early education. Bernadine was raised in a Catholic school and family, and she knew that was not what she wanted for her own children. She was also influenced by her time as a university student. While she was not enrolled in any education classes, the conversations about schooling were ongoing. Bernadine recalls, "There was a lot of discussion about free schools and philosophy or whatever you want to call it. That children should be allowed to play and grow at their own speed and in their own direction. And mainstream school was not where that happened." Her partner's mother was a teacher, which Bernadine reflects also influenced their conversations and reflections about schooling.

Their family choices were about more than "just" school for Bernadine. It was about educational and societal reform. Bernadine put it this way: "We were children of the 60s. We grew up with the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War, and all of that stuff. From the time I was old enough to understand what was going on, on television, on the news, there were so many profound things going on. And you just felt you had a responsibility to make the world better."

This responsibility influenced Bernadine's educational and career choices, as well as the way she and Jim would raise their family. "We had a different definition of success. Even for ourselves." Their parents were very disappointed that they had not decided to pursue professional careers. Bernadine and her partner were aiming to raise their children to be able to make their own choices for their own lives, rather than predetermining what they were going to be, or what they were going to do.

As their eldest child was approaching school age, Bernadine and her partner started to think about school.

> I really didn't want to put my kids into [Catholic School], because in my experience there was an awful lot of guilt. We knew this community was here and we knew about "Barney's School." We didn't even think about putting the kids in public school. We wanted them to be in Barney's School.

For them, education didn't just happen in school; it happened everywhere. "They learned about animals because we had animals. They would ask a question, like "Why did the leaves fall in the fall?" We would do our best to explain it to them in ways they could understand. And they learned to read. They didn't learn to read at school, they learned to read at home." This blurring of boundaries between school and home was a common theme amongst study participants.

Their children would attend both mainstream and alternative schools throughout their childhood, switching between the two, depending on family circumstances. Both would excel academically and accelerate/skip grades when attending mainstream, and both would go on to post-secondary studies in areas of their passion.

Kathy and Ish

Ish and Kathy participated in interviews individually; however, they came together to the area, and it was together that they came to be involved in the Community School. They have many shared experiences, and I begin their stories here together. They were born and raised in the United States—Ish in New York and Kathy in Michigan. They moved to Toronto and ultimately moved to the area of the school after friends from Toronto brought them for a visit. For Ish and Kathy, it was a political and lifestyle choice to leave the city and embrace a new way of living. Ish explains:

> Many of us came here to create a new kind of society. School was part of that new society that we wanted to create. And I guess that was kind of naïve of us. But that's what we wanted, to live in a way that was more grounded, more down to earth. Seems cliché but, more tied to the land, more tied to real work and human values. We rejected materialism. We wanted a better kind of way of life. And so creating our own school was a part of that vision. It made all kinds of sense.

Kathy and Ish came with big dreams about improving the world. While pulling together documents from the early school days, Kathy found the journal she had begun decades earlier, to keep notes about the school. In the front, outlining their hopes for the future and the challenges the area faced, they identified as barriers the death of the family farm, outmigration of rural residents to urban environments, and "an impersonal education system preparing children for

their role in industrial society" (Kathy, 1974, personal notebook). Kathy looks back now, amazed. "We've been talking about this stuff for 50 years now but it was stunning for me to see that we had it all planned—what needed to happen to make the world a better place."

Ish credits Kathy with bringing the passion for education, recognizing her commitment to different ways of learning and her knowledge of alternative education and educational philosophers. Ish explained that while he cared deeply about teaching the children in their care differently, Kathy's passion extended to reforming education more broadly. They have worked together for many years on projects in the broader community. Their work with the Community School was a part of that commitment.

Kathy

Kathy did not discover the school when she arrived—the school drew her to want to move to the area in the first place. Kathy explained: "I'd heard that there was a school going . . . it was one of the selling points of the area. It was like the second or third day I was here. I got in touch with Barney. He came and picked me and [my daughter] up. And that was the start."

Kathy read a great deal about alternative education, including the work of Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf Schools, John Holt, and others. This reading and influence continued as she worked as a teacher in the Community School and beyond. Kathy tells the story of all of the parent-teachers going to see John Holt speak. Holt's work heavily influenced the educators and they were excited to see him speak. Kathy shared that, at the time, Holt was experiencing a dip in his commitment to alternative schooling. Holt's message was disappointing:

> There was a short period in his life where he threw up his hands and said, "No, don't have your own school, just send your kids to school and just try to support them as much

> as you can." We were so disappointed—I remember going up and saying to him—"but we have a beautiful school. We have a lovely little school," and he just says, "Ah well, it won't last." He was so negative. We were all there and we were all so excited to see him.
>
> And he changed back again. But the one time he was in the area, and we all got to hear him—he was like, "no, no, just send them to school and support them as much as you can." It was heartbreaking [*laughs*].

According to Kathy, the school's teachers continued with their commitment to alternative education, undaunted by Holt's wavering optimism. And just as before, they continued to talk a great deal about educational philosophy.

Kathy went on to teach in other settings, including in another alternative school and, ultimately, mainstream schools, where she worked until her retirement. She never lost faith in teaching kids in different, gentler ways. But, like Holt, throughout her career, she did change where she thought it could be done and where she attempted to make change. Reminiscent of Holt's belief that you support those as much as you can, Kathy reflected,

> You help and you be with and you love the ones you can. You know the ones [the kids] you've got. And you find ways to work within—whatever system it is, to make things better for the few you've got. I still feel that way and you try to influence other people. Try to show ways of doing things that work for the school and for the kids.

Ish

Ish was a young American draft resister, and when he arrived in the area, he was keenly interested in changing the world. Ish grew up in the suburbs in the United States and was exposed to many progressive ideas about education by his community and his mother, whom he identifies as a progressive educator. He read *Summerhill* when he was 14 years old and credits it

with influencing his thinking about education. When he met Kathy, who was passionate about these issues, they jumped into the new school with both feet—engaging in new ways of learning and living together in their new community.

While Ish gives credit to Kathy for being the driving force behind their decision to enrol their daughter in the Community School, he was certainly onboard and committed to the cause. As one of the teachers, Ish taught the Community School students to sing Canadian folk songs, which he was learning along with them. As he recalled, “It was a good thing for me as a new Canadian because it encouraged me to learn Canadian folk songs. I remember very well bringing home books from the library to learn. I also remember a lot of cooking, eating, and driving. And that kind of stuff.”

Their daughter, Sandi, also a study participant, remembers school as an extension of her life, not as something separate from it. Sandi shared, “We moved here when I was three and we got in with people and communicated with neighbours and spent time at different people’s places and then called it school, right? Like for me, there wasn’t an actual start.”

Sandi attended the Community School until Kathy moved to teach at a new alternative elementary school, which Sandi then attended as a student. Sandi entered mainstream school for her high school years. She would later go on to university and become a high-school teacher. She continues to work in mainstream schooling and works towards influencing the system from within.

Other Community Members

Each of the school members brought their own ideas and philosophies of education. They did not always agree, but they were always passionate about their commitment to learning and living together in new ways.

There were additional families, partners, and adults involved in the Community School—more than are represented in this overview, of course. Those represented here are the parents-teachers who were willing and able to share their experiences and memories of the school. I do not suggest that their opinions, memories, and reflections are representative of all members of the school community; however, there were many commonalities and similar philosophies of education, and of life, expressed.

Next, we will turn to educational philosophy.

Chapter Seven:

Education Is Too Important to Be Left to Professionals

While the parent group agreed that they wanted a different experience of education for their own children, they did not always agree about exactly what different should look like. This group of passionate individuals came together to build a community they believed would help children thrive. They were anchored in their understanding of what they did not want their children's schooling experiences to be like. They wrestled philosophically in reaching agreements in the particular approaches within the school.

In this chapter, I set out to explore the parent-teachers's belief systems which stemmed from the ways in which they were impacted by their own family and early education experiences. I will also share the story of the visit by a commissioner researching the appropriateness of public funding for private schools in Ontario. Through this visit, the parent group would solidify their commitment to independence from state oversight, by rejecting both the Ministry of Education's notion of "satisfactory instruction" and any consideration of government funding.

The parent group included one former mainstream schoolteacher, at least two draft resisters, and several politicized university students. The creators of the school were dissatisfied with mainstream education and they decided to educate their own children differently. This came at the price of conventional success and material wealth, a cost well known to the parent-teachers. Many walked away from career and earning potential, as engineers, writers, teachers, and more. These newcomers were following an unconventional path, not only in the education of the children in their care but also in their lifestyle choices as a whole. The parent-teachers were making very deliberate choices around material success and wealth. Parent-teacher Ish shared his recollection of the work involved in the day-to-day operation of the Community School.

> It was a very political decision. It was not a hard one, as we lived in that world. Most of the people we knew were back-to-the-landers, so we didn't face disapproval [from them] for doing so; it was a choice. Oh, my goodness, when I think about the effort that we put into it. We had no resources at all. So poor. Barely had vehicles that would get us around. It does amaze me looking back. Having come from growing up in suburban Long Island.

While the immediate community of newcomers/back-to-the-landers shared common sensibilities around education and lifestyle choices, that acceptance was not universal. Several parent-teachers faced disapproval or concern from their families. I recall the family lore about how my grandmother responded when my parents left Toronto for the isolated, rural area they would come to call home. "It's beautiful, but what are you going to do here? You can't eat the scenery." Many of the school organizers faced disappointing their own parents and families, who did not understand why their loved ones were choosing these paths, walking away from conventional success, and opting instead for apparent hardship. Bernadine shared her memory of moving away from the expected path:

> I know our parents were very disappointed in us, that we had basically abdicated our potential, when we felt that what they wanted for us was more or less prison. I was working at Imperial Tobacco in Montreal, which was considered one of the plumb jobs in the co-op program in the math faculty at U of W. I fell in love with programming, but I came to the realization that I couldn't do that work unless I was willing to work for a huge corporation like Imperial Tobacco—which, even at that time, was considered immoral. Nobody knew about heart disease at the time, but they definitely knew about cancer. The company's response was, "It's all just statistics," and being a math major, you know that statistics can be made to say whatever people want.

> My roommate was working for CIL, and came home one day and said they made Napalm. I was like, "Oh my god." I knew that I didn't want to be part of that. That's why I came up here.

Participants' choices to move to this area and build the school community can be seen in the dichotomy between what some parents saw as "throwing your life away" and what participants saw as opportunity to embrace and create the life they wanted, both for themselves and for *their* children.

Each of the families involved arrived in the community independently of one another. Some came to the area before the school's inception; some came *because* of the school, while others arrived without any prior knowledge of the school at all. In any case, whatever brought them here, upon arrival they came to know each other quickly and began working together towards the common goal of doing school differently.

It was not difficult for the newcomers to find each other. Bernadine shared, "It was really easy. You ran into people all over the place, especially in the summertime." Ish reflected on this ease of connection, as well as the connections made between those new to the area and residents from prior to the influx of newcomers. "We didn't have the internet back then, but there was a lively grapevine of information. People talked a lot more than they do now, it seems to me. There was also a lot of chatter back and forth between newcomers and locals."

The community established through the school resulted in relationships that would last many years, throughout the operation of the school; many continued for the decades following the school closure. These family-like relationships created strong ties, which were recognized by those outside of the school community. Sylvia recalls after her daughter entered mainstream high school, new friends came to visit and they observed the closeness amongst the former

Community School kids. “The [Community School] kids could just look at each other and start laughing about something that nobody else knew—they could read each other and they [the new friends] could never figure out how to break into that.” Sylvia mused that one of the unusual areas of instruction, ESP (Extra Sensory Perception), could be partly responsible for the connection. “Remember those ESP classes? I think it worked [*laughs*]. I think that you guys were so familiar with each other, like a family, that you knew what the other guy was thinking.” The connection between the members of the school community, as well as the impacts of the school, would continue to be felt by its members for far longer than the few years that the ephemeral school operated.

Philosophies of Education

So, what brought these families together to establish a school? What was their common purpose? Was there one? I asked each participant parent-teacher to identify one key idea that they would like to see reflected in this research. I received many responses, but one seems to encapsulate all of the others. Ish put it this way: “Education is too important to be left to professionals.” Any teacher in a day job simply could not parallel the passion, commitment, and love the teachers brought to the Community School.

Few of the parents had a background in teaching. There were exceptions; Barney came from the mainstream system as a teacher and at least two others had parents who taught in mainstream schools. One parent would go on to the Faculty of Education in the years following the school closure. Most, however, were new to teaching. Sylvia reflected on coming to understand her new role, daunted by the undertaking.

> I had to start thinking. “What would I teach in the school? I’m not qualified to teach anything.” But, I always liked cooking and art when I was in school. So I taught home

> economics, learning how to cook and how to present it. When I taught cooking, everybody had to find the ingredients in the garden. I think there were a lot of benefits to the school that take a long time to realize. You learned how other people lived, not just how your family lived.

The parents, as they became the teachers, hosted children overnight and treated each of us like members of their own families. Sylvia reflects, "We loved every one of them. We became a family, responsible for each other's children overnight. That's why it all knit together so well; our lifestyle and our school experience, they were one—they were actually the same thing."

We attended school three days a week, year-round. Parent-teacher Kathy clarified that this was a thought out, purposeful decision, which was not about workload or a decision made without reason.

> We had school only three days a week because we felt that it was really important for kids to be in the real world. Even though our school was not like other schools, we still felt it was really important for them to be a part of the world and a part of our lives, rather than in something "other." It wasn't just that we didn't want to do it. It was that we felt it was important.

As a child, the lines between school and life often felt blurry. There was no bell to signal the end of the school day, no report cards to summarize and categorize our achievements. Life was school; school was life. The blurring of boundaries between school and not-school was so different from what I would come to experience in the public-school system. In public school, schoolyard fences to keep kids in would replace the Community School's barnyard fences for keeping horses in. Bells and line-ups would replace the seemingly endless rambling around the farms, outside with friends.

The main thing they held in common? We called them both school.

Being Brutalized by the System

Each of the adults' own educational experiences influenced how they viewed the education of their children and the opportunities they wanted them to have. They wanted those educational experiences to be very different from their own. Kathy reflected,

> I didn't want them to be, to put it really bluntly, brutalized by the system, as I think so many of us were. We were all coming from the time when we had gone to school in the 1950s, or earlier. We were reacting to what schools were like then.

The parent-teachers did not want their children raised to become cogs in the machinery of the existing social order. The goals and dreams for the Community School were big. "[To us,] education meant making a difference in the world and not wanting our kids to be a part of the training for society as it was. Wanting them to be a part of a different kind of society." The school was a product of its environment. The parent-teachers were working to create new kinds of communities and the school was a natural part of that work. Sylvia points out that this was around the era of Woodstock and widespread calls for social change, "So there's a lot of this peace, love, and groovy kind of thing going on."

Factory Schooling

Keeping in mind that all parents would come to develop the school and its curriculum together, they spent a great deal of time considering, discussing, and debating educational philosophy. While they may not have always agreed about how they wanted to see things done, there was common language around how they did *not* want things done.

The theme of factory schooling was a recurring one, emphasized by students and parent-teachers alike. One of the students, Heidi, reflected, "It was very much like 'We're gonna do our

own thing and we don't want our children in this mainstream brainwashing,' you know, factory schooling, basically right?"

Parents did not want their children to become a part of the materialistic, consumer-based society, with the bells, line-ups, and institutional frameworks. Gabriel, one of the students, reflected on this:

> They didn't agree at all with the mainstream—how things were being done, how people were being taught, from a young age, to think. I believe they wanted to raise people to think outside of the mainstream, outside of the box. To be aware of other things. We all know that society places value on people based on how much money you make, how much you're worth. They didn't agree with that. They wanted to try to raise people that were more aware of their fellow people, the planet Earth, the trees, the birds, the universe, and universal energy. They just didn't see the mainstream school getting that.

It was clear from each parent-teacher—and made clear once again when speaking with each of the students—that school was a political act. Some of the parent-teachers read widely about alternative schools; others only read about alternative schooling as an afterthought. Still others did not do any reading about alternative education at all.

Accessing alternative-education material was not easy in the days before the internet, but educators were resourceful in doing so. Kathy reflects on her own reading and that of other parent-teachers. "I read quite a bit of Maria Montessori and a lot of Holt. Barney was much more into Steiner, but I did read and know about Waldorf schools. And Illich, but I was not that taken by that. We all read *Summerhill*, of course."

In any case, regardless of how much reading a parent-teacher had done about alternative education, school discussions and decisions were impacted by their influences. Ish recalls that

they spoke a great deal about educational philosophy and talking through plans and decisions for the school.

Serious Undertaking

It was a school requirement that each family enrolled in the Community School would commit to teaching and to working together to ensure that the school continued to function. There was no financial support from the government and no fees were charged. Keeping the school functioning involved a lot of creativity, and even more hard work. Everyone was dedicated to the project; otherwise, they simply would not stay. Without a physical school building, as members of the school, parent-teachers took turns teaching, transporting, feeding, and housing all of us kids. The host family was responsible for organizing and/or providing teaching at their home.

The parent-teachers agreed that school was not a laissez-faire undertaking. School was school, and they approached the education of the children with deliberation and discussion. Ish reflected upon this collective commitment.

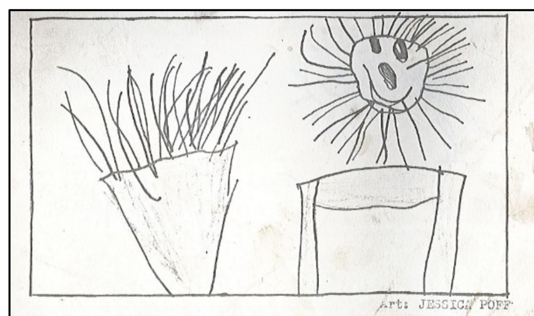
> We were pretty darn serious about it and it took a lot of seriousness. I mean, simply feeding you all well, and transporting you to the next place, and getting everybody into bed, and keeping the house warm, all of those things. Those organizational management things took up a lot of effort. We were certainly very serious about the educational side as well. Everybody was—this wasn't socializing.

Parents discussed their own areas of interest and expertise and used these, along with what they felt children needed to learn, to divide the areas of instruction. We learned in typical subject areas, such as mathematics, reading, writing, and history. As well, we learned about things that were far less standard, such as trick riding on horseback, calligraphy, meditation, and

yoga. My father, who had worked in Toronto as a writer, helped us publish a student newspaper, called *This School,* later known as *The Bugle* (see Figure 2). The students wrote and edited the paper. A local business provided photocopying in exchange for advertising in the paper—the only advertiser. The students also sold the newspapers at a local diner to recoup other costs.

Figure 2

Student submissions to the school newspaper, This School!



"UNLITTER" PROJECT UNDERWAY

The Killaloe Community School is working on a litter project.

We are trying to clean-up Killaloe. We will be putting out garbage cans and posters in various places in Killaloe.

We will also gather litter and display it on a table to show people how much litter there really is in Killaloe.

We made charts and counted the litter. There was a lot. It was mostly smokers' litter and candy wrappers.

We talked to Reeve Jack White and asked a few people if we could put garbage cans in front of their stores.

We have recycled cans and we are decorating them.

this school

the killaloe community school newspaper

A NEW PLAY

By CONRAD HINRICHSEN

The Case of the Disappearing Girl is a new play that has been written by KCS students.

Teacher Kathy Eisner says she thought up the idea of the play because it sounded like fun.

Work on the play started in January.

It took about four weeks to write the play. It is a funny mystery story.

Ms Eisner says all the children and two adults will appear in the play.

Where and when the play will be performed hasn't yet been decided.

CALF BORN

By KELLY KLINCK

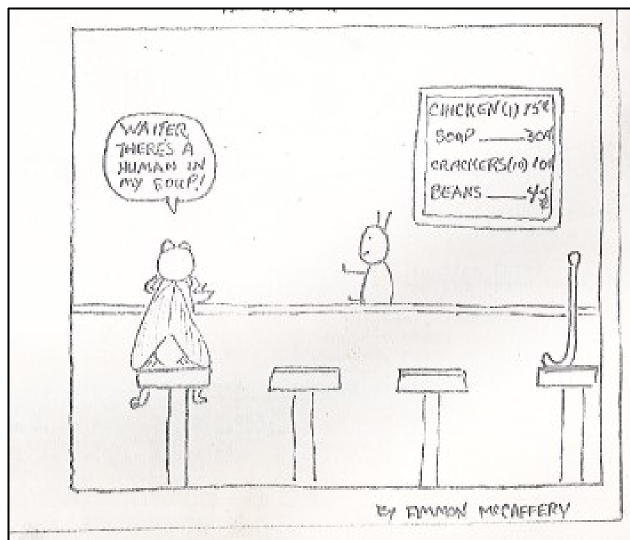
A calf was born April 1 at the Klincks' place, no foolin'.

On Sunday morning, when Jim came back from doing the chores he told us that Blackberry, our cow, had a calf.

After breakfast we went down to the barn and saw him.

He is black with a black and white face. We tried to think of a name for him, but we couldn't find one that everyone liked. They were all too silly.

Art by SONG EISNER THEILHEIMER



CARNIVAL COMING

Fun and games for the whole family will be the main ingredients of the First Killaloe Community School Summer Carnival.

Michael Robinson, one of the co-ordinators of the event, said there will be more than a dozen games, food booths and day-long contests such as bowling for a pig.

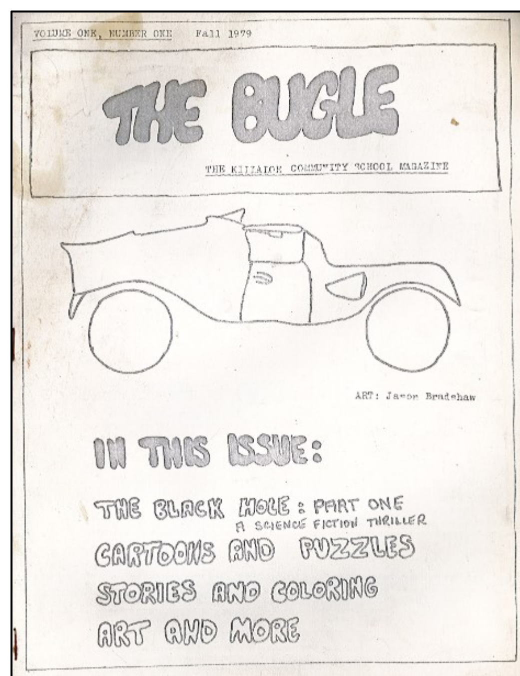
Other events will include slow bike riding, pea-sucking contests, croquet tournament and obstacle races.

The Carnival will take place about mid-June.

"Entrance fees for all events will be kept low," Michael said. "We want to provide all the fun of a carnival without the customary rip-off factor."

"We'll be raising money with the carnival, but we'll also make sure people get good value for what they spend."

Proceeds from the event will be used to sponsor a school trip to Manitoulin Island later in the summer.



VOLUME ONE, NUMBER ONE Fall 1979

THE BUGLE

THE KILLALOE COMMUNITY SCHOOL MAGAZINE

ART: Jason Bradshaw

IN THIS ISSUE:

THE BLACK HOLE : PART ONE
A SCIENCE FICTION THRILLER

CARTOONS AND PUZZLES

STORIES AND COLORING

ART AND MORE

We participated in survival week, learned to play accordion and sing folk songs, made quill pens from feathers, and tended the animals on the farms. I will explore more about these experiences in the next chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to understand that the interests and skills of the parent-teachers, as well as those of the students, drove the school.

During these formative experiences, nobody explicitly said we were doing things to build resilience or to develop independence, though these would have been laudable goals. We participated in survival week to learn how to identify edible plants. We learned how to care for the animals in the barnyard, because the farm animals needed to be taken care of. In conversation with Farenga (2011), John Holt reflected upon the difference between the value of experience for experience's sake and of experience where needed. John Dewey talked about "learning by doing":

> The way for students to learn (for example) how pottery is made is not to read about it in a book but to make pots. Well, OK, no doubt about its being better. But making pots just to learn how it is done still doesn't seem to me anywhere near as good as making pots (and learning from it) because *someone needs pots*. The incentive to learn how to do good work, and to do it, is surely much greater when you know that the work has to be done, that it is going to be of real use to someone. (as cited in Farenga, 2011, p. 9)

How can we ensure we are teaching kids how to think critically, how to work towards leaving the world a better place than how they found it? How can we help them build resilience and confidence in their own abilities? In my experience of over 15 years teaching in the mainstream system, I have found that this has become one of the main topics of conversation in professional-development sessions and in staff rooms. In this Community School, at this time,

the recipe was not in planned out pedagogical moves or in checklists monitoring the gradual release of responsibility. As kids, we were expected to do hard things. As kids, we were trusted to be able to do hard things. So, we could.

In his writing about the Community School, Barney reflected upon the assurance of kids in the school:

> Our children seem to have a natural confidence about them, not overconfidence or brashness, but a good estimate of their own abilities. In part, this probably comes from not having marks. The children compete only with themselves. Can you do it? Can you do it better? It is well understood that each one has certain abilities and talents. Everybody has something unique and "best," and they are encouraged to communicate this to the others. (as cited in Farenga, 2011 p. 9)

Building confidence, resilience, and independence were by-products of leading our lives; they were not designed as activities themselves.

Child-Centred

Almost all of the teacher participants shared that at its core, the Community School was child-centred; through seeing each child's individuality and ways of knowing and learning, teachers could reach every child. Kathy explains, "Every child is a gifted child. And we have to find those gifts and nurture them. I guess that's the central part. As you know, child-centred was a big part of the whole school—everybody's philosophy."

The one-size-fits-all solution to education common in mainstream schools was rejected by the parent-teachers of the Community School. My sister began her learning in the Community School and our parents moved her to the public-school system briefly for a part of Grade 1. It did

not take long for them to decide to return to the Community School. Rebecca recalls the decision being prompted by a math test she brought home from her new school:

> I came home with the page of 100 addition and subtraction questions. The first 20 or 30 or 50 (or whatever) of them were all correct, no errors. The rest of them were all incorrect. My mother looks for a pattern of misunderstanding, as she couldn't figure out what it was that I didn't understand. I told her I got tired of answering all those questions so I just started guessing.
>
> She thought that was outrageous, so she went to the teacher to explain that 100 questions is too many for a Grade 1 child to answer. She explained that I got sick of answering all those questions and the teacher said, "The mark is what the mark is."
>
> And my mother's like "that's it," and pulled me out of public school because that story tells you everything you need to know about what's wrong with public school.

Rather than learning that is directed by the child or even responds to the child's learning needs, this task was not designed to be about learning—it was designed to be about assessment for the teacher's grade book.

The child-centred approach was communicated at the introduction of the school to new families. Existing families took turns sharing the school's vision to families new to the school. Sometimes this meant visiting the school in action; other times it meant visiting the new family in their home. One of the students, David, looked back at how his family was introduced to the school, and remembered feeling impressed by how different the approach seemed than he had experienced in his public school. David shared his impression when one of the parent-teachers came to visit and to explain the Community School approach:

> She was at our house, saying "Welcome to the free school. If something is not working for you, don't feel bad about it. Or if it's not your thing, it's not your fault. It's just that we need to change the curriculum or we need to adjust something and talk about it." I remember being fascinated by that, thinking, "Wow, this is very different from public school."

It was a core belief that not all children learn in the same ways or on the same timeline; as Kathy put it, they saw "individual attention as the key to learning." Central to this was taking children's interests and motivating them through those interests, "not through rewards and stickers. Through really noting them and really looking and listening to children." In this noting and listening, educators came to know the best ways to reach each child. Since the children spent so much time with each family and with each other, knowing the students was second nature. Knowing their interests came with the territory.

Increasingly, many mainstream schools make the claim that they are child-centred; however, those efforts are constrained by the bureaucracy of administrative policy, standardized curricula, and one-size-fits-all approaches to school. For those of us working in mainstream schools today, the challenge to be child-centred in our approach is constrained by the structure of schooling.

Changing on the Fly: Auto Mechanics Is Just not Their Thing

The interests of the children would drive planning. Sometimes things did not work out the way the teachers expected, and they would rethink their plans. Bernadine had been teaching an auto-mechanics night course for women, and she thought the students would be interested as well. She brought a car engine to be disassembled. Bernadine recalls,

> I expected the kids to be more interested in it than they were. But they tended to look down on anything mechanical. I think that the culture, so to speak, just wasn't there. I remember having an engine sitting on a stand, and being prepared to tear it apart with them. They just didn't seem to be very interested in it at all. I really thought they would be, but no.

It did not go as she anticipated, and she abandoned the plan for something else. This is reminiscent of the story I shared in the first chapter of this dissertation, when my mother noted that, during a language lesson, the students simply were not interested in what she was offering. "*And one by one they leave, apparently convinced the whole thing is a waste of time*" (Poff, 1979, p. 44). Parent-teachers had the luxury to rethink their lessons, without the constraint of predetermine curricula and learning goals.

When Passionate Views Lead to Conflict

What to best teach? How to best teach? When to best teach? These questions were a matter of frequent discussion and sometimes of disagreement. Decisions were ongoing, made amongst the group, usually at pick up and drop off or over a glass of wine. Bernadine explained, "We talked a lot. Because the kids were moving around, the parents had lots of contact. As you picked up kids and dropped kids off, we saw one another a lot." Parents' commitment to the Community School kept everyone talking about the best ways to do things. Agreement was not always attainable, perhaps not even desirable, as everyone continued to push each other's thinking. The memory of one of the students, Gabriel, sheds light on decision-making:

> The parent-teachers involved would obviously have discussions. Some would agree. Some would disagree. Sometimes it was a good agreement. Other times it wasn't. Some felt there wasn't enough schooling; some felt there was too much schooling. You know

> my dad might be like “well you can’t put pressure on kids; we’re not running a regular school thing here.” And somebody else would be like, “No, but we need to do this, if they’re going to learn proper timetables or proper writing.”

There would come a time for some parents when the school was not meeting the needs of their families, and those families would move on. Until that happened, the discussions, sometimes heated, would continue. Change would come alongside discussions, as observed as early as 1978. “School has changed—is changing—will doubtless change again” (Poff, 1979, p. 45).

Reading and Telling Time

Parent-teachers felt that the pace of learning for each child was as unique as the children themselves were. They agreed that there are things children need to learn, such as how to read or to do arithmetic. The *when* and the *how* about teaching them was up for discussion and debate. As much as there may have been a common goal to do things differently, there was not always agreement regarding how to do those things. There were philosophical disagreements among the parent-teachers, where beliefs did not always align.

Telling Time

Decision-making on individual issues was left to the parent-teacher who was hosting and the teachers who were planning instruction. This allowed each parent-teacher to make day-to-day decisions, which would reflect their own philosophy. If a parent had school at their home, they made the decisions. When Sylvia hosted school at her farm, several parent-teachers came together to share teaching responsibilities. She explained it this way, “If someone had school at their place, they made the decisions. I had school at my place, so we all made the decisions. Each one of us made our own decisions for what we were teaching.”

This did not mean there was always consensus around those decisions. The parent group at Sylvia's farm decided to create a daily schedule. "We made a decision here that one parent didn't like, but we thought the kids should know how to follow a schedule and read a clock." This location-based decision was not implemented in other places. As the children learned how to tell time, however, they carried the skill between homes. According to my mother's *Natural Life* article, the kids put this new found time-telling skill to use. "Enthusiastically the children divided the day into ten half-hour classes. Spontaneously two of the oldest . . . learned to tell time so they could make sure the schedule was followed properly. Even the youngest recognized twelve o'clock because that was lunchtime" (Poff, 1979, p. 45). Another parent-teacher, Kathy, also recalls when educators put the use of schedules into place. While they had not reached a consensus around the decision, that was okay.

> [The kids] were so excited about the idea of having a schedule. To me it was a way of helping learn to tell time. Barney wrote a song: "They Don't Tell Time Too Well." That just highlights the differences of opinions there. He was fine with it, too, you know, that we were going to try to do it this way for a while.

Compromise and collaboration worked together, as long as they did not compromise the main goals of decentralization and child-centred education. Teachers worked to ensure that the goals of the school were based on the needs of the children, not based on pre-conceived rules and policies.

Learning to Read—According to Rudolf Steiner

At times, differing philosophies of the educators in the Community School would become polarizing amongst the adults. Rudolf Steiner's influence on one of the educators in particular is one example. In a 1923 lecture, Steiner (1996) asserted that teaching children to read

too early was dangerous and delaying teaching instruction could allow people to lead to happier lives. "Such hardening of the entire human organism . . . manifests in the most diverse forms of sclerosis later in life, and can be traced back to a faulty method of introducing reading to a child" (p. 104). Steiner believed that children, prior to the changing of their first teeth, were not ready for the work of reading. He insisted that early reading instruction would distract them from the real work of the child, which was in acquiring the first three faculties: to walk, to speak, and to think.

Kathy recalls conversations with Barney, who, under Steiner's influence, did not want his children to learn to read before they changed teeth. She did not agree, and felt the rigidity of Steiner's thinking was outdated. "I kept thinking, well, the world is different now than it was then [when Steiner was writing]; there's writing and words everywhere." When Kathy was reading with one of the children, she asked him if he would like to take a turn reading to her. His response, as she recalled, demonstrated his understanding of the adult's differing philosophies.

> He said, "Yes, I would like to read because it makes the books go slower, but I can't. Dad says I shouldn't read yet." That is one of the things I [still] don't like about Steiner Schools—how stiff they are and also how they interpret things in Steiner's way and only Steiner's way, forever.

Sylvia recalls working with the same child and his brother, teaching them to read. Both children would learn to read, one before the changing of their teeth when he was about 5 years old. The other would learn to read when he was closer to 8 years old. This would be on *their* own schedules, not on Rudolf Steiner's, or any of the educators involved. Experiences like this lead to parent-teachers' understanding of learning. "We discovered that if you don't bug people about stuff and you let them go at their own rate, they usually catch up."

The Report of the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario

In 1984, the Premier of Ontario appointed Dr. Bernard Shapiro, Director of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), as the sole commissioner to study the appropriateness of public funding for elementary and secondary private schools in Ontario (Shapiro, 1985). In order to develop its recommendations, the commission undertook several lines of inquiry. One of these involved visiting several private schools in Ontario. The Community School was registered with the Ministry of Education and was one of forty Ontario private schools selected and visited to represent school types throughout the province (Shapiro, 1985).

At that time "direct provincial funding of schools not operated by the Ministry of education or publicly elected trustees [was] severely limited" (Shapiro, 1985, p. 2). The question of the appropriateness of public funding of private schools was raised and Dr. Shapiro was appointed to lead the commission to investigate.

The importance of satisfactory instruction would become a focus of the commission's work. "Satisfactory instruction" was not defined at the time, either in the legislation or in the accompanying regulations (Shapiro, 1985). However, legislation did identify "satisfactory instruction" as the minimum standard to be met in order for a child to be excused from attending a publicly funded school. ("A child is excused from attendance at school if he is receiving satisfactory instruction at home or elsewhere" (Education Act, 1980)).

Ultimately, the first recommendation of the *Report of the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario* would be to continue the requirement "that satisfactory instruction be required for all school age children in Ontario" (Shapiro, 1985, p. 41). The second recommendation attempted to clarify what this might mean:

> Relative to the requirements for compulsory schooling, the term "satisfactory instruction" [can] be defined in law as programs which: (i) use English or French as the first language of instruction; (ii) include learning experiences in the arts, Canadian and world studies, language, mathematics, physical education, and science. (Shapiro, 1985, p. 41)

Sylvia remembers when the school received a letter from the commission that requested a visit to the school. In her recollection, the purpose of the visit was to ensure that "satisfactory instruction" was happening at the school. She also remembers the school's response to the request. Sylvia recalls looking back at the visit, "We told them that we did not accept their criteria for 'satisfactory instruction.'" They asked to see report cards and school records, which the school did not have. The school's position was that they did not use or need report cards to see how the kids were doing. Community School organizers did not want the Ministry of Education to have the right to oversee programming at the school.

When the school was invited to showcase learning for the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario*,* the parent-teachers and students created a video, with each child picking a topic they were particularly interested in studying. Everyone gave a presentation about his or her area of interest. For example, Sylvia recalled one of the students shared their experience of working with a farrier and learning how to shoe a horse and to file horses' hooves. This interest-driven learning was one example of the school's philosophy in action. The fact that a video was made in the 1970s at all speaks to the innovation of the school community, which Sylvia summed up when I asked her about how the video was made. "You know, Barney had an amazing way of scrounging up stuff from people." Working together and doing the near impossible on a shoestring budget—that was the essence of the Community School.

Despite their concerns about government interference and oversight of the nature or quality of instruction, the parent-teachers did invite Dr. Shapiro to visit the school. On the visit, he shared lunch prepared by the children and observed classes including mathematics and woodworking. Bernadine remembers that she was teaching mathematics,

> I was trying to teach fractions. We were at the little outbuilding close to the house. It might have been the first time I tried to teach them about fractions and thought, 'Oh, well, this is easy; they'll get this in no time.' And they were just totally befuddled by it all. I was very unhappy about that because I wanted it to be impressive, and it certainly wasn't. I never had the impression that we were being subjected to this, that it was like an inspection. It was more like, "we're interested in what you're doing. We want to see what you're doing." Now, when they were there, I felt maybe we shouldn't have [*laughs*]. That maybe it wasn't such a good idea.

The kids eventually came to understand fractions. . . . However, Dr. Shapiro was not there for the celebration.

> Weeks later, after trying several times, the light bulb finally went off. How joyful we all were that now they understood what those things were. I had tried with pies, and all kinds of things. And what finally did it was the panes of glass in the window. "See, there are six pieces of glass and if you're just talking about one—that's one sixth."

During the visit, Dr. Shapiro raised the question of public funding. The Community School's position was clear; they told the commission that they were not interested in any government funding. Sylvia shared, "We were quite happy to do what we were doing out of our own pocket. Then the government does not have the right to interfere in what we're doing. We're not accountable to them. If we take their money, we'll be accountable." While not unique, this

position appears to have been somewhat unusual. The commission's report addressed this funding issue. "Representatives from a few of the visited private schools did not want public funding on the grounds that this would, sooner or later, undermine the independence in their schools" (Shapiro, 1985, p. 20).The parent-teachers responsible for the Community School did not want public funding or government oversight or interference. They did not issue report cards to categorize or provide evidence that the kids in the school were learning.

"Real" School and Real Conflict

Different philosophical conflicts played out in different ways. At one point or another, many of the Community School children expressed a desire to try out "real" school—and several of them did. There was no school-based agreement on how to approach these requests and this decision was usually up to parental discretion. We learned earlier about Sylvia's children, who attended mainstream school for a full year prior to their return to the Community School. Others attended mainstream school for shorter or longer periods, depending on family choice and circumstance.

One of the older boys was nearing high-school age when he told his family that he wanted to go to "real" school. His father told him he would not be permitted to go. My mother, strongly believing in children's rights to self-determination, stepped in. She offered to have him live with our family while he tried out mainstream school. As this was not in keeping with the family's wishes, it raised conflict between the parents.

Sylvia summarizes the incident: "Kathlyn said, 'Screw you, Barney. If he wants to go, he can stay at my place.' Your mom and Barney butted heads quite a bit over things like that." His son did stay with our family and attend mainstream school briefly; once his experiment with schooling was over, he returned to his parent's farm and continued his learning.

They found agreement over many other things, and their relationship would continue after the Community School days, up to Barney's death many years later.

Ish discussed differing opinions about children spending time in mainstream school. Some families felt spending time in mainstream school was important, while others did not wish for their children to attend, even briefly.

> There was quite a debate among us; it came out in different ways. And Barney was the polarizing person or perspective in this. He thought that what was taught in mainstream education was largely irrelevant to what really mattered in life. And what really mattered in life was being able to farm and work and survive in a place like this. Kathy and I never felt that way. We felt that kids had to deal with the world as it is, which includes public schools and employers and people who judge you by how you talk. It certainly was a debate.

Polarizing views would lead to conflict between the parents along the way. Decisions were made, and the parent-teachers continued on, though not always with unanimous agreement. Rebecca recollects:

> I think it was a lot of the long protracted decision-making that takes place in consensus models or in non-profits or volunteer groups. I also would say that the decisions were guided by whatever framework that each family or participant brought. Barney ran the show a lot of the time anyway because he started it, but over time that shifted and different players had a greater voice for different reasons.

There were many areas of dissenting opinion, as decisions around this different way of schooling were thought, rethought, and reconsidered by everyone involved. Research participants did not sugar-coat the challenges between members of the school community in

navigating priorities. Kathy shared that “there were some things that were held in common, but there were lots of times where we had different viewpoints. And it was challenging—school wasn’t seen in the same eyes by everybody at all.” They found commonality where they could and continued to discuss, debate, and decide things together.

All of the disagreement ensured that decisions were not made by rote, but by purposeful choices made in the moments, based on the needs of the children and families involved. While there may not have always been agreement, this dynamic model and in-the-moment decision-making were among the greatest strengths of the school.

The fundamental beliefs of the parent group—of the value of decentralized, child-centred, interest-driven learning outside of the mainstream—usually over-rode the disagreements about the day-to-day details. There would come a time when these disagreements could not be resolved, and when that happened for a family, they would leave the Community School.

Ultimately, the Community School would cease to operate. There was a decrease in enrolment as parents withdrew, moving on as their children aged. Families moved away or moved to another alternative school. Others left because they could not support the interpersonal fractures in the school. Some left because they felt strongly that their children needed opportunities to learn in the mainstream-school system. Some of the families moved away because circumstances/life simply changed. The Community School closed in the 1980s after running for more than 10 years, not through a dramatic change of heart but through individual family choices, which were as unique as the families themselves.

How Did You Know They Were Learning? How Could You not Know?

The parent-teachers in the Community School did not provide report cards, so how did they know the children were learning what they needed to learn? How would they know if the

children would know what they needed to know if they entered the public system? The Ministry of Education provided curriculum guidelines and texts for instruction, but these were not the driving force behind instruction. Bernadine recalls, “We did get curriculum information from the Ministry. We didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to it.” Bernadine continues, “The parents wanted the kids to learn what they needed to know” and it wasn’t that hard to know. “Having grown up, we kind of knew what they needed to know.”

Report cards were not the method to determine whether the children were learning. Parent-teachers were not driven by assessment; they were driven by the learning itself, built from their growing knowledge about alternative education practices. Ish explained,

> That goes back to A. S. Neill and John Holt who believed that kids learn by doing. By being out there and doing stuff, following their interests, and not being worried about that [assessment]. Those of us involved in these things, we weren’t worried because we worked so closely with all of you. The student teacher ratio was so small. We knew if kids were having problems.

With the title of this chapter, “*Education is too important to be left to professionals*,” we began the journey exploring what drove the parent-teachers to open a school. What motivated them to want to teach their own kids rather than to rely on professional educators? The chapter shares the story of the visit from the professionals—from a commissioner representing the Ministry of Education, reviewing the meaning of “satisfactory instruction”—a concept rejected by the parent-teachers in the Community School. The creators of the Community School created a learning environment that was not set aside from the lives being led by the families involved.

Being a part of their world was an explicit goal of the school. “Satisfactory instruction” in the artificial environment of a school was exactly what the parents were attempting to avoid. Sylvia reflected on some of the strengths of the instruction in the school:

> We had things in our school that they didn’t even have in the public-school system—like Bern, she was teaching computer-type math. We had the kids taking a motor out of a truck and putting a motor back in a truck. And during that work, learning fractions from the tools. You know, that type of thing. There were a lot of things that we had in our school that never did appear in the public-school system.

According to Sylvia, during the visit, the commissioners representing the Ministry of Education asked parent-teachers to provide documentation in support of the learning that was happening at the school.

> They also wanted to see our report cards and all that crap, right, our records. And we said, because every parent had had to teach in the school and we’re all there all the time, “We don’t need report cards. We can see how our kids are doing.”

The dichotomy between the two kinds of schooling raises the question: Who gets to decide what is “good education” and what is not? Perhaps the question itself hints at the parent motivation. Sylvia’s response suggested that the parent-teachers felt they were being asked the wrong questions. What are the right questions? How do you know the children are learning? How do you know they are learning the things they need to learn?

> You knew if your kids were learning. How could you not know? If your kid suddenly says, “Mom, how about if I read you the bedtime story tonight?” By little things and by big things you could tell if your kids are learning or not. And we were just as concerned for our kids to learn as any parent.

Although the school only ran for a few years, the impacts on me and on other members of the school were lifelong and influenced our thinking about learning and living. This research allowed us to revisit memories and explore the influences on each of us in our lives today.

Chapter Eight: Getting There Is Half the Fun

Imagine in today's school system receiving a five-year-old child into Grade 1 who arrived with the ability to complete 100 addition and subtraction problems quickly, confidently, and without error. As a teacher, you might wonder if that child was gifted in mathematics.

What if I also told you that most of the children who attended the Community School and then entered the public-school system arrived with similarly advanced skills? You might begin to wonder if this was related to intelligence or if it was because the school had developed a system that intuitively played to the strengths of the child and supported alternative learning in a way that allowed them to flourish.

In this chapter, I share stories and memories that will show the flavour of what it was like to attend "school" in this alternative way, while emphasizing that the approach to teaching, while unusual, was effective for many of the children. I share memories of subject teaching from the adult educators as well as from the learners. I aim to share how the philosophical approaches of the parent-teachers, as explored in Chapter 7, played out in the school's day-to-day activities. I will share stories of transportation, subject learning, school trips, and the day-to-day activities of school.

Transportation to school, methods of learning at school, subject matter, and even what defines school are viewed in different ways than in mainstream schooling. We will see that the Community School was unique from home schooling as students went to school every day and learned from a variety of educators and in a variety of environments. As we learned in the last chapter, the parent-teachers wanted to give students learning experiences that were relevant to the children while helping them mature and develop compassionate, holistic worldviews. They

encouraged us to think for ourselves, to challenge things as they are, and to imagine that they might be otherwise.

The Community School offered education to children ages 3 to 13. There was a belief in the capability of even the youngest child that permeated the decisions of the educators. This belief was reflected in what happened even before we arrived at school in the morning. Starting at a very early age, some of the children travelled long distances from their home to school. For many students getting to school was a part of the learning adventure.

I found that sometimes participants' memories differed or conflicted; however, this was less frequent than I had anticipated. Memories more often reflected and echoed, reinforcing and strengthening each other. The stories and memories shared in interviews sparked my own memories. I was one of the youngest students in the school and left for mainstream education while the school was ongoing. Many other students were older and/or were in the school for longer than I was. Some of the stories shared by participants would have taken place while I was a student, but some events occurred either before I started or after I had left the school. In either case, I have attempted to share the memories of participants as they shared them. I have not always differentiated whether or not I was attending the school during the time of a participant's reflection. Sometimes I simply do not know.

Depending on the age, the role (parent/student), the location of school, the timeline of the school (from 1969 to somewhere in the 1980s), as school adapted and changed, people changed and people moved in and out. As with any school, there is not one story of the Community School. This being said, I have attempted to capture the essence of life in the Community School. Close your eyes, lean back, and listen in to the cacophony that was the Community School.

Transportation: Getting There Is Half the Fun

There is not very much that was conventional about the Community School. That includes transportation. No school buses stopped at the ends of our driveways to pick us up, and no late bus brought us home after the non-existent extracurricular activities. Many of the families lived on farms in close proximity to each other. This allowed children to walk or ride ponies and horses between the homes hosting school. Even young children, five and six years old, would travel several kilometres on horseback from their own home to the farm hosting school that day. Barney McCaffrey (1979, as cited in Farenga, 2011) highlighted this practice in his early writing about the Community School.

> Getting to and from school is and has often been quite an adventurous, educational experience, involving pushing out snow and mud stuck cars, caravans of ponies and buggies and/or bicycles and walkers, keeping in touch by CB radio from stretches of 3 to 6 miles (without an adult at times), strong winds blowing small children over the snow. (p. 8)

The recollections and reflections from former students were striking in their similarity to Barney and Kathlyn's 1970s era depictions. Rebecca, my sister and a former student, reflected,

> You rode horses or you walked everywhere. The cars didn't work most of the time or they'd get stuck or break down, and then you'd have to push them out or walk. And there weren't always cars. There were wagons and horses or no transportation at all, because you had legs and you could walk.

These were the days long before cell phones, but several of the farms and vehicles were equipped with CB radios and families would communicate between each other to ensure safe

arrival—or to communicate delays in travel. My mother wrote about one such case in a *Natural Life* article.

> Late April and an unexpected severe snowstorm hits the Valley. The children are snowbound on a farm four miles north of the highway for the better part of an extra day and night. Slush and half-frozen mud make the roads impassable. Two children are homesick, a third is coming down with a severe cold and drug stores and doctors are fifteen miles away. CB assurances filter out over the air and eventually parents work their way out over the mud and slush to pick up their children. (Poff, 1979, p. 46)

Despite being miles apart, there was a strong sense of connection between the families and within the school community, especially during those unexpected storms. The connections between families created bonds, many of which continue to hold, decades later. Parent-teacher Sylvia put it this way: "We loved every one of you kids. We became a family. We were responsible for each other's children overnight and I think that we all learned to have respect for each other, for what we were and who we were."

Travel by Car

Some families lived farther away from the other school families, and their children could not travel to school on their own. Parents of those children took turns driving. My parents drove us to school and my mother wrote about carpooling from the parent-teacher perspective:

> It's Wednesday and time to leave for school. Start out with Rebecca and Jessica in the back seat of the car. Four miles off the highway, we pick up Timmy, Kathy and Kelly Dale. Back onto the highway for five miles, then a north turn onto another concession road. Fifteen minutes later, we're there. Nobody from our family is teaching today, still

> school has cost one of us an hour and a half of time and three dollars in gas. (Poff, 1979, p. 46)

Planning and teaching in an environment without standardized schedules, bells, and buses required flexibility. The variability in approaches to scheduling often resulted in unpredictability for the receiving host family. Parent-teacher Kathy explains, "If you planned to do writing and math in the morning, and a science experiment in the afternoon, and people didn't arrive until two o'clock in the afternoon, well then I'd just feed everybody and go on from there."

There was a commitment to this alternative form of education by all the families who had joined the Community School. As one of the students, Jayson, reflected, "the alternative was a lot more work for everybody than it would have been just to send us on a bus every day [to public school]." Parents committed to everything from teaching to transportation, and no taxpayer dollars funded either of them. All of the families lived below the poverty line, yet they remained committed to getting their children to school because they believed in what they were doing.

Kelly's family farm was located farther away from the other school homes, so she could not complete her trek to school on horseback, though by age 7 she had a pony and was already an accomplished rider. Instead, her trip would be by car, which was not as straightforward as many of us have come to expect nowadays. Farm lanes were long and cars were often unreliable, or at the very least, complex. Kelly remembers getting cars started:

> In order to get to school we used to park the car out at the end of the lane. It was a half mile walk out to the car with a toboggan, carrying a bucket of red hot coals that you dug out of the stove, to put under the oil pan to heat up the oil enough that you could start the car to go to school.

In understanding the complexities of something as seemingly straightforward as getting to school, it is important to understand that all of the families involved in the Community School were making choices about lifestyle, priorities, and politics. All of this was a decision.

A Typical School Day—Was There Such a Thing?

The conditions for learning and living at each home reflected the individual philosophy and conditions of the host family. Host families made the decisions about learning in each location, and as such, conditions would be very different from location to location. Since we rotated from home to home for school, the circumstances of school could be quite different depending on location; whatever the family home was like, school was like. School was usually, though not always, hosted on farms. My family, for example, lived on the edge of town, so when school was at our house, it was a town experience. As my mother wrote in 1979, "nine of the children come from farms where there is no hydro, no plumbing and no central heat. School, since it rotates from home to home, is no different" (Poff, p. 44).

Rebecca recalls:

> It was like hippie group homeschooling where you moved like a pack from one house to the other. They taught you whatever they taught you. They fed you whatever they fed you, and slept where you slept. Sometimes in piles and heaps like puppies. Sometimes in beds with sheets, and blankets, and mattresses. You would all stay separate at that house because the family just felt very strongly that the boys should be there, and the girls should be here. And other places you were like a *Lord of the Flies,* happy shit show of a pile of puppies. Some decisions were very localized based on the family unit.

Having school hosted in a variety of homes and hence a variety of settings was seen as a strength of the school. Due to the inherent differences between homes, there really was no

typical school day. Children needed to keep an open mind and to be respectful while understanding that different ways of living and doing things was okay. David, one of the students, reflects on a day in the life of the Community School.

> A typical day at the free school? Well it depends on whose place we were at. But we'd get roused pretty early. We'd eat breakfast, run around a little bit, and then get down to whatever, at whose ever place we were at. It would be different for every place.

One commonality is that there would be a wide variety of types of learning. As student Heidi recalls, there would be "structured activities mixed in with kids running around a farm—free-for-all kind of stuff." The shared childhood memories often do not centre on the learning of traditional subjects, but rather on the unusual subject areas and the "free-for-all kind of stuff."

Sandi, another former student, who is now a mainstream secondary-school teacher, summarizes what she remembers learning:

> Oh, [it was] learning about life! It was more just about being . . . about life skills in general. I remember doing some math and the Spanish lessons. I can't forget sitting around that little farm table and learning Spanish, late at night it seems. I remember sometimes when they gathered us around to say, "Okay, we're going to learn things" but nothing that really sticks in my head like, "Okay, we learned this or that." We just learned how to be.

We participated in a wide variety of learning activities, lessons, and subjects. Music, history, horseback riding (trick, bareback, traditional riding, gymkhana), language lessons (French and Spanish), mathematics, science, history, calligraphy, meditation, massage, ESP, swimming lessons, yoga, woodworking, auto mechanics, and so much more. We created a student newspaper *This School*! (also titled *The Bugle*).

We went on school trips including one memorable one where we travelled 600 miles round trip to attend a powwow. We created and performed in Christmas concerts and parades. As we were not a conventional school, the children's plan for a Christmas concert was somewhat unexpected by the parent-teachers. Again, my mother's (1978) writing paints a vivid picture:

> Christmas, and the children insist they want to hold a public concert. Are these largely undisciplined children capable of so sustained an effort? Most parents seriously doubt it. In the face of opposition, the students put together a program involving memorized dialogue, timed gymnastics and, as a grand finale, a free-for-all piñata. It goes relatively well, despite the peanuts that rain down out of the smashed papier-mache cow's head, and are ground into the carpeting of the rented hall. (Poff, 1979, p. 45)

As demonstrated in this concert, the variety of activities was driven by the interests and passions (and tenacity) of the students and by the passions of the parents. However, they were also inspired by the day-to-day needs of the running of the school and of the farms where school was hosted.

We learned to care for animals, including horses, cows, pigs, chicken, and geese. We learned to make quill pens from feathers that we would then use to create calligraphy and works of art. We learned to farm and to forage for food that we would then cook and eat together as a community. We learned we could do hard things. We learned to stay warm and to care and watch out for one another. One participant, Kelly, put it this way: "Everything, everything you were exposed to was learning." She explained the holistic nature of the school in this way:

> What do I remember not learning about in the free school? I mean the thing about it was we learned ridiculous things—Spanish when nobody was learning Spanish. We had yoga,

> when nobody was learning yoga and trick riding and woodworking and meditation. Yes, yes, and I also remember learning math, spelling, and creative writing.

The teaching of traditional subjects was a given. Students were learning the "three Rs," but they were also experiencing life and subjects that in the 1970s and 80s it would have been difficult for a child to learn in a traditional public-school setting. The eclectic and dynamic environment of the Community School gave students a unique educational experience. David recalls, "There's all this sort of the typical stuff of like sitting down and writing, and math, and art, lots of arts and crafts." However, he also recalls learning about things that were very different from his recent experience in public school:

> Some of the more interesting things: calligraphy—with pen and ink. Dipping a pen and a quill, using a feather. I remember it because Barney said that I was a bit of a natural—I found that fascinating. "Try that out." I learned to play the violin a little bit. That was another huge part. We even made an entire music recording.

Music was a common memory of many students. Several talented musicians taught in the school. As students, we benefited from a wide variety of music lessons. Sandi remembers the music and more:

> I mean, meditation, even that we learned that! We learned cool things—like acrobatics with Marlice. There were neat opportunities. I remember going into the high school and doing music. [Barney] would take a bunch of us in to the high-school music room. And I remember learning how to go out and pick salad stuff at the farm and in the bushes.

The variety of learning opportunities were intended by the parent-teachers to show us broad ways of viewing the world, in keeping with the philosophy that children should be participants in and of the real world. Sylvia explained**,** "We wanted our life to dovetail with what

you all needed to learn. Just like using the wrenches to teach you fractions while you were taking a motor out of a car or a truck."

Life dovetailing with school was a common goal. This was the case, for example, in the restoring and painting of 55-gallon oil drums, which we transformed into public garbage cans for local residents. Some participants remembered presenting a proposal to the local municipality, requesting that town council ensure they be emptied on a regular basis. I remember painting the cans in three sections, especially orange and black, though there were other colours as well. I also remember the feeling of pride, as a young child, using the garbage cans around town, feeling we had made a real difference for our community. This project is just one example of the educators encouraging children to be involved in— not separated from—the world around us. We were taught to look at our community environments and were encouraged to become good community citizens.

Asking participants what school felt like is asking them to answer an impossible question. Participants were often in the school for many years. Over time, school continually changed. When I asked Rebecca what it felt like to be in the community school, her answer made the complexity of the question clear. "That's like asking what your childhood felt like." In place of answering the question, participants explored memories, shared through story, which like patches of a quilt, came together to create a unique whole pattern of experiences.

Animals: Horses and Geese and Sheep, Oh My!

Ponies were used in teaching as well as for transportation—whether for regular riding lessons, trick riding lessons, or training for competition such as in the gymkhana. We learned how to care for, saddle, harness, and feed horses in addition to riding them. Ponies were found to be great confidence builders (McCaffrey as cited in Farenga, 2011, p. 8). For Sandi, one of the

younger students at age 6, the adventure of transportation was equine. Her family's farm was close to other school farms, so she regularly rode to school.

> I remember taking the horse through the back trail to McCaffrey's by myself, as like a 6 year old, on this stubborn old horse. For several kilometers. I was six and this horse always stopped in the creek and rolled over. And I'd have to jump off and wait for her and pull her out of there and then get back on and head up to Barney's—in through the back gate and bring the horse there.

Sandi marvelled, in hindsight, at the responsibility accorded her as a young child. However, it was in keeping with the goals of Community School—to build independence and self-reliance—as identified by several of the parent-teachers.

Supporting care for the animals fell into the hands of the children, who, at a young age, would be given real responsibility. This was more than school lessons; this was the work of the farm. Again, my mother's writing creates a vignette of the school days.

> Gabriel and Daniel, 6-year-old twins, have been sent out to locate a missing flock of sheep. Over the CB radio, you can hear their walkie-talkies as they separate, circle and meet again. Fifteen minutes later they reappear, seven sheep in front of them. Kelly and Zoe, 4 years old, take over as the shepherds with instructions to shout for help if the sheep start to wander. (Poff, 1979, p. 44)

It was not all work and no play. During those unstructured times, we found ways to entertain ourselves using whatever we had on hand. Creativity was the name of the game. Jayson recalls,

> I remember Ammon and this one particular sheep. He would have his fiddle and he would sneak up on that sheep and jump on his back. And it would run across the field as fast as it could, trying to get Ammon off.
>
> Ammon would have his fiddle and play it with this sheep running across the field. It wasn't all that tall, so Ammon didn't actually fall that hard, but it'd buck him off and he'd try again. Because the sheep was running so fast, it looked like an old movie that was recorded fast. Oh man, it was hilarious. The sheep eventually got wise though. Ammon could play that fiddle like there was no tomorrow, man.

The confidence in taking care of these tasks and animals did not come easily. For some, it was built over time. Before the confidence, came fear. Kelly recalls, "I remember saddling the horses, learning to be bigger than you were—when you were dealing with the animals. You had to be big and tough and strong. How are we even still alive?!"

Sandi also remembers being afraid of the animals:

> There were a couple of good workhorses—and some rowdy ones. And a lot of dogs, geese, and roosters. I remember "Mad Rooster." I remember running away from Mad Rooster a few times, from getting attacked. He'd come down on your head. We were little kids. I remember how we were told to hold our ground.

It was often in the barnyard that we learned to stand our ground. We learned to be strong, or at least appear to be strong. Rebecca remembers being taught to stand up to the animals: "I learned that geese are scary, but that if it runs at you honking and you hold your ground it won't hurt you."

We learned how to hold our own against the farm animals. I remember riding Pizza, the tiny little pony who was more stubborn and pigheaded than any creature I had ever met, or have

met since. I remember riding bareback, using bailer twine as reins, and knowing that to ride Pizza, you had to be more stubborn than he was. We all learned to read his body language, to know when to jump off because he was going to roll. I learned from Pizza that you may be small—but that does not mean you have to act small.

We learned that the workhorses, who towered over everyone human and animal alike, were gentle giants. Riding the workhorses was easy as they were as predictable as they were calm. From them, I learned you do not have to push your weight around just because you've got it.

From the animals, we all came to understand how important it is to stand your ground, no matter how big your challenge. Strength is not just about being physically strong, but also about holding space, standing in your own truth, and thinking for yourself.

Gymkhana: Games on Horseback

Figure 3

Riding in Preparation for Gymkhana.

Note: Photo reprinted with permission

Figure 4

Riding in Competition

Note: Another student, riding Pizza, the same pony I rode in the gymkhana event. Photo reprinted with permission

The term *gymkhana* means “games on horseback.” Gymkhana often focuses on child riders participating in timed events, with an emphasis on patterns and speed. Events include barrel racing and the cloverleaf. “All of these events are designed to display precise, controlled actions and tight teamwork between horse and rider at speed” (“What Is Gymkhana,” n.d., para 1).

Our lessons included subjects not ordinarily taught in school, ranging from meditation to mathematics and music, from glass-blowing to gymnastics, from cooking to calligraphy. The fact that some families lived in town while others lived on farms was seen to be an advantage, as many lifestyles could be explored and experienced. In keeping with all of this, a number of unique experiences became components in the school’s curriculum. One example is seen in preparation for, and participation in, a local gymkhana event (See Figures 3 and 4).

> One of the most ambitious and successful ventures along this line was a 20 mile round trip with 10 children, five ponies and a horse with a buggy, a sulky and one adult. We camped over two nights, drove and rode in the parade, entered Gymkhana events, a great, relaxed learning experience. We have found ponies to be great confidence builders. (McCaffrey, 1979, as cited in Farenga, 2011, p. 8)

A lot of lesson time was spent in preparation for the riding competition—the focus of the lessons connected our lived experiences with the anticipated trip. In order to travel to the gymkhana event, we had to know how to care for the horses along the travel route as well as ride them in the event once we arrived. This was all a part of the learning in preparation.

These kind of special events came up again and again in the memories and stories of participants; they left an indelible impression on those involved. Even in the more permissive 1970s and 1980s, these learning experiences—such as ten children travelling on horseback and with wagons for two days with one adult (See Figure 5)— would not have been possible in mainstream schooling. For students such as Gabriel, the memories often focused on the journey as much as the event itself,

> I remember the older boys in the buggy on the main street with a sign that says "50 miles to the gallon of oats." I remember camping [at the arena] and meeting some men, who I thought were cowboys. One guy who had an artificial leg, because a horse had fallen on him—this had obviously happened to him a few years prior.
>
> That's where I learned to clean the cooking pans out with clean sand. I remember being really impressed. We did the cloverleaf, barrel racing—you know, all the different events.

Figure 5

"50 Miles to the Gallon of Oats"

Note: Photo reprinted with permission

For Kelly, the journey to the event overshadowed the event itself, as the seat in the sulky was up for grabs. Her pony was trained for the sulky and 7-year-old Kelly was looking forward to driving the sulky herself. "Sugar was the pony pulling the sulky. The sulky was one of the best—with rubber tires and suspension. It was one of the most comfortable rides." As much as she was looking forward to it, her sulky ride was not to be. "I got sick, so I ended up in a car. Somebody else got to ride in the sulky. I didn't ride in the rodeo either because I was sick." Her disappointment is palpable as she recounts the missed opportunity to ride in either capacity.

The Author's Gymkhana Experience—Reflections on Memories

I do not know if I actually remember the gymkhana events, or if I remember the stories I have been told about the events. Memory and story have blended and blurred. My event involved riding to a barrel, dismounting, and climbing through it. Pizza (my stubborn, pint-sized pony)

was to pause as I came through and wait for me on the other side. Horse and rider would carry on together.

This is not how events transpired.

When I came through the barrel, Pizza was not waiting patiently, displaying the tight teamwork between horse and rider at speed. Rather, he was trotting away, having none of this nonsense. This was not, as they say, my first rodeo (it was, of course) so I did what any self-respecting gymkhana rider would do—I ran after Pizza at full 6-year-old speed, placed my foot into the stirrup, swung my leg over, and continued with the event.

I did not win a ribbon, but in my mind's eye, I can hear the announcer calling out—"Watch this young lady—this isn't the last we'll see of her!"

Survival Week

Heidi remembers survival week. One of the parent-teachers set the kids out with the plan that they would get by with only our outdoor skills and wit. We were trained in what we could eat, what we could not. The memory looms large for Heidi:

> Barney tried to get us lost in the backfield and showed us what roots to eat. I can identify those roots to this day. I can still identify sarsaparilla roots and I know that they are used to make root beer. I remember that we weren't given any food. We were given instructions on what we could eat. Of course, there was the sneaking back to the house to get actual food from Pat.

She reflects that her memory of the scale of the adventure might be disproportionate. "I do remember survival week, which was probably a day of the week." That can be the way with memory: An event looms larger in our memory than is reflected in the minutes, hours, or days the event actually took place. Ahead of her initial interview, Heidi considered the nature of

memory. “I've been thinking about this a little bit, leading up to talking to you. Kind of trying to think like, what, what things are actually my memories versus all the things that we’ve all talked about over the years, right?”

Looking back, recollecting, and telling stories over time changes our understanding of them. Often, revisiting of memories becomes revising of memories; revisiting them over a lifetime changes the story, of course. Whether rehearsed or recalled, memories make us who we are today. For many of us, looking back and reflecting, there is surprise at the responsibility and freedom we were accorded. The lens of hindsight allows us to see things differently and to reflect upon them anew. At the time, we were just doing, learning, and living.

Let’s check back in with our “kids.”

The Beaver Pond

There are about 700 species of leeches in the world and about 50 of them are found in Ontario. According to *Canadian Geographic*, all leeches are carnivores, but not all are bloodsuckers. Most eat worms or insect larvae and are not interested in humans at all. They carry no known diseases, and most often, their bite is nothing more than an annoyance (Lanken, 2004). Used for a variety of medicinal purposes since ancient times, the leech is currently being utilized in several clinical applications. The word leech is believed to have been derived from the old English word for physician, *laece* (Porshinsky et al., 2011, p. 65).

Despite this legacy, the much-maligned leech does not appear to have many fans in the swimming community. The beaver pond was where we were taught to swim, though I do not recall any of the adults joining us in the water. Even when we were not participating in lessons, school on the farm was often hot and dry—we learned and played through the heat—and sometimes the siren song of the beaver pond was simply too strong to ignore.

Sandi reminisced about the beaver pond:

> I remember there is a little rock that you can swim out to and if you can get on that rock, you're okay but you can still see the leeches—so many leeches—trying to get on the rock until you get back in. I remember thinking one time about dodging lessons. But I was so extremely hot.
>
> It's just like "Okay, never mind, I'll just go in and get cooled off at least." They kind of taught us to swim, but it was also just a place to cool off on those really hot days. I don't think it was even deep. You didn't want to touch anything anyway.

Kelly, one of the younger students, put her skills at self-determined learning into play when it came to the beaver pond. "Perhaps if it was time to go to the pond for swimming lessons with the leeches, maybe you'd just not ever arrive." She reflected that even if the parent-teachers didn't feel activities were optional, there were ways around it.

Sometime reflections didn't wait until you left the school and became an adult. For Rebecca, the reflection came along as she grew older in the school.

> I learned that the beaver pond is really good to swim in when you're little and you don't know anything, but then when you get older . . . there are a lot of leeches. And you wonder if there were always leeches and you just didn't know? Or if the beaver pond is different now? And also why didn't anybody tell you that it's not okay to swim in a beaver pond because there are leeches?

The interesting thing is, while I vividly remember the beaver-pond leeches, I do not actually remember ever getting any leeches on me. It was the idea that we might—perhaps the beaver-pond leeches were one of the many type that prefer insect larvae and tiny worms and are

not interested in humans. And perhaps others remember the bloodsuckers; my memory blending and blurring may be a gift.

Yoga

The Community School—it does not all sound idyllic. I guess in some ways it was, and in some ways it was not. For many, the adult-initiated and run nude yoga sessions was one of the ways it was not. Rebecca summed this part up, "When you hit puberty you don't want to do naked yoga with any other pubescent teenagers and also not with adults who have long dangly penises."

For David, the naked yoga was no more comfortable, though upon reflection, he identified a potential purpose for the activity. "I felt fairly awkward at that time, which I understand was kind of the whole point of the thing. I think the whole ethos of the time—to be comfortable with your body and relaxed and not be so uptight about it." While he reflected that he understood the rationale, this did not make the timing great or the activity any easier for some of the kids. "But some of the people were just entering puberty, right?" In hindsight, I wonder about how safe some of the kids actually felt, and if they also felt compelled to participate in activities that made them uncomfortable.

Reflecting back on the notions of choice, of self-determined learning, we explored earlier how some of the students gravitated to preferred activities, away from those they did not enjoy/feel comfortable with. Students often identified yoga as one of those less preferred activities. Usually, this would be met with individual avoidance—like in the beaver-pond stories.

Kelly shares: "You could kind of maybe get lost on your way to the back field for naked yoga. Wander off in the wrong direction and end up not making it. You just didn't end up getting there."

On more than one occasion, the kids teamed up in their decision to avoid yoga class. Heidi looks back, "I remember the day we revolted." Sandi recalls the same day. "I don't remember ever wanting to say no or to leave [most activities] . . . except for meditating maybe or yoga in the field. I remember running out there—'He's still behind us. Yes, go! Maybe we can just duck away in the woods here somewhere before we get there.'"

Heidi finishes the story, "Barney gave up on us and we just basically ran around in the forest for most of that day."

Jayson also remembers avoiding class, at first on his own, "I ran off to hide in an abandoned Chevy in a field, and they sent out a search party for me." He recalls that he was later joined by other hesitant yoga students, "And then the next week when we had to go do naked yoga, there were like three or four of us hiding in the same Chevy [*laughs*]." Maybe this is one version of self-determination in learning: The students indicated their preferences and passions by voting with their feet.

Meditation

Outside of nude yoga and the leechy beaver pond, one topic that loomed large in nearly everyone's memory was meditation in the "cave." Some participants remember meditation sessions as boring; others remember reading hidden comic books in the cave. Even the cave is described in a variety of ways: as a root cellar, an actual cave, or a hole in the side of a hill.

Jayson looks back at the meditation sessions as something that simply got in the way of what he really wanted to be doing—running around, hanging out with kids and playing. "I remember being distracted, not really meditating, just trying to sit still so I didn't get in shit. That's all that was for me: 'Hey, we're gonna sit still for an hour.' That's hard for a young lad." Rebecca shares that some kids simply made up stories to appease the meditation teacher. "Some

of the amazing things that happened from Barney's point of view as a result of meditation were just stories that kids made up to please him, because he wanted people to have these remarkable transcendental experiences."

On the other hand, at least one of the children seemed to have found the transcendence that was being hoped for. David remembers:

> We'd go sit in the dark and the cool, and just try to sit quietly. One time, there were mosquitoes in there. I was getting bit to hell. I remember coming out and telling Barney, "Look I'm getting itchy and I'm getting eaten by mosquitoes." I stopped and he said, "Here, try this experiment. Next time you get bit by a mosquito, imagine the feeling of the itch starting to spread from the one localized spot spreading over your body."
>
> It was first on my arm. "Then let it spread over your arm and upper body until it covers your whole body. And then when it is spread out far enough it will disappear altogether and you won't feel it anymore."
>
> That sounds ridiculous and I went back and tried it. And I remember I was like, "Oh yeah, it's actually working."

Some of the things we did in the Community School might be best summed up with statements just like that: "that sounds ridiculous" and "oh yeah, it's actually working."

History

Parents often taught subjects based on their knowledge and passion for a topic. Mathematics was taught by a university math major. Writing was taught by journalists and music was taught by musicians. My mother was passionate about history and felt it was important that we understand our past, lest we be destined to repeat it. Gabriel looked back at those history lessons:

> I remember your mom teaching us history. She was really good at it. I still am interested in history. I'm not a history buff or an amazing encyclopedia, but it certainly made me interested, from a young age. I remember she talked about Jacques Cartier, the Ottawa River, and Samuel de Champlain. I remember the astrolabe that was found in the farmer's field. It was one of my lifelong lessons, that I became interested in that stuff.

In addition to the commonly taught explorer/settler content, my mother introduced the children to many other parts of human history. She was passionate about teaching about social justice and the mistreatment of Indigenous Canadians by the Canadian government. She used the music of Buffy Saint Marie to tell the largely untold stories of marginalization and oppression. She organized a school trip to Manitoulin Island, 300 miles away, to attend a powwow and learn about the people of Wikwemikong. Gabriel remembers fundraising for the trip:

> We did a games day, trying to raise money for a trip to the powwow up to Manitoulin Island. It was over at Echo Farm; who all came, I don't remember—you know, it was the folk of the day. We did a raffle, the games, and then we went to the powwow. We hired Miles Hartwig to bus us up. The whole Manitoulin Island thing—the water, the lake. That was probably the first time I was out in a motorboat in my life. I remember the regalia was really, really beautiful.

In the summer of 1961, the first "Wikwemikong Indian Days" was held, with an aim to revitalize the Wikwemikong powwow. It is now known as the Wikwemikong Annual Cultural Festival, and is one of the largest, longest running powwows in north-eastern North America (Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, n.d.). We were not at that first powwow, but we did attend one in the early revitalization years. I remember the ceremony, the joy, the dancing. I remember

the blue and white beaded bracelet that I bought and would cherish for years that followed our trip.

My mother cared deeply about how the Canadian government was treating Indigenous people. Sylvia, one of the parent-teachers shared her recollection. “Kathy was very passionate about bringing that out into the open. The injustice, the native culture. We raised money to take all you guys to the powwow.”

Following the trip to Manitoulin, students explored the concept of totems—we were each invited to choose an animal to represent ourselves. I chose the groundhog, and my father made me a gift to represent my totem (See Figure 6).

Figure 6

Teddy the Groundhog, the Author’s Totem

Sylvia shared her memory of some of the learning that came after the powwow. “I figured because everyone was going to be sitting on the floor that everyone should make a pillow. The way to identify your own pillow was to embroider your totem on it.”

The teacher-parents created learning experiences designed for children to learn how to think, which was seen as more important than learning facts. They set out to expose us to a wide variety of experiences and ways of living. The hope was that this approach would help to cultivate our critical-thinking skills as well. For parent-teacher Sylvia, the proof lies in the lived experiences of the children who grew up out of the school.

> A small handful of people did alternative school. We jumped in with two feet; we had no idea what we were jumping into, but we jumped. And I'm not sorry about making that leap of faith. That's how you change the world. I'm very proud of all of you guys. You all have children of your own that keeps multiplying the base. It doesn't matter what you chose to do in your life. You're influencing people; my daughter is influencing her granddaughter, right? Because you learned things like love and respect and how to think for yourselves.
>
> And so, there you go. I guess we were trying to change the world.

Chapter Nine: A Beautiful Little School

Four decades have passed since the school closed. Children and grandchildren have been born. Participants have lost family members, including parent-teachers and one of the students from the school days. There have been marriages, divorces, degrees granted, hearts broken, and hearts mended. We have chased careers and dreams, then abandoned, reimagined, and re-established them. Participants have lived full lives since the Community School closed; however, its legacy continues to affect each of us in unique ways.

Looking back and reflecting on those early school days with fellow Community School members has confirmed many memories and has awoken long sleeping ones. As one of the youngest students (age 3–7, while others were up to 5 years older), I often did not have the clear memories of the older children or of the parent-teachers. Their stories added colour and focus to the shimmers and shadows of my memory. The often asked, "do you remember when . . ." resulted in many moments recollected anew. It has been a delight to see memories reignited and reimagined. Sometimes, the bittersweetness of memory has resulted in the holding of shared space. It has been an honour to participate in each of those moments. In this chapter, I bring together memories and reflections of the adults and children who shared the journey of the school together and explore how they feel about those memories now. We will see how their time in the Community School resonates with the now, in their reflections and memories.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I shared my aim to gather stories and to document peoples' recollections about what life was like for them in that free/community school. I shared many of those stories in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Along the way, participants' reflections have crept in. In this chapter I ask, "Looking back, what [do] they think/feel about that experience now"?

Like Family—For Better and for Worse

The students involved in the school came to know each other very well, through spending days and nights learning, playing, eating, and staying together. David, one of the older students, left public school when he was 11 or 12. He left the community school when he began high school a few years later. David recalls going into town with the strongly bonded group of schoolchildren:

> I have vivid memories of piling out of the back of a pickup truck with a ragtag bunch of crazy kids, full of vim and vigor, and a bit of attitude. That sense of togetherness, camaraderie. I think that was a big part of it for me.

For the schoolchildren, being together created shared experiences, which in turn created strong bonds between us. We were together wherever we went, in whichever home was hosting school that day. The children rotated between homes, but the adults did not. For some children, this created feelings of warmth and connection. Student participants shared how the school affected their emerging worldviews. Sandi was a student at the school from 3 years of age until she moved to another alternative school at age 8 or 9. She shared her adult realization that our experiences were unusual.

> It felt like a big family. It just felt normal I guess because that was our normal. That was life. I didn't think it felt unusual until recently when I started looking back thinking, "Wow, that was weird." It felt normal. It felt like a big family and like, "this is just what we do."

The theme of family was not just raised by the children in the school; the parent-teachers also made strong connections with members of the school community. The relationships that began in the school became meaningful outside of the school, too, as the line between school and

not-school continued to blur. Parent-teacher Ish reflected on the importance of lifelong relationships established through the school, including his friendship with my father:

> Your dad, and to some extent your mom, actually taught me how to get into the writing business. I probably wouldn't be in the writing business today without a little advice. And some of it I absorbed through the school, because that was our family, right? It started through the school. That's not to be discounted. We were a living family of people, really excited about learning. It really was like being part of a big family.

That is not to say that all of the parents agreed about approaches all of the time. One parent-teacher shared their discomfort about some of the things that happened in the school, such as sleeping in the freezing summer kitchen without adequate blankets, or being expected to participate in naked yoga in the fields. Often, they did not know about it at the time of the school operation, "When in subsequent years, I realized what actually happened there, I was appalled[2]."

There was a lot of unstructured time when we were left to ourselves, playing together. This included seemingly endless free time outside during the day, as well in the evenings. This was intentional, as outlined by school founder Barney McCaffrey, who saw unsupervised time as "probably worth more than all our adult instruction [and] as much as possible, we try to let them do much of this by themselves" (as cited in Farenga, 2011 p. 8). Where the intent may have been to build independence, one unintended consequence was that it created intense feelings of responsibility for some of the children.

Some participants felt the weight of being responsible for the younger kids. Rebecca reflected on that feeling of responsibility. As she was always one of the older students, she paid close attention to the relationships among the adults, alert to conflicts between them. "Then we

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[2] The participant making this comment asked to remain anonymous, as relationships among the participants are often ongoing.

had—I want to say a watchful vigilance—to make sure everything is going to be okay. Attentiveness to the shifting sands of what was going on."

Jayson also talked about how whatever was going on in the host family's home could impact the kids who were staying there for school.

> You had to deal with other people's domestic situations, like if the parents were at each other. Like, I've seen frying pans get thrown across the place [*laughs*]. All that stuff is kind of tough to deal with as a young person.

And what would the students do when things became tense? Jayson shared that the other kids would follow the lead of the kid who lived there, often "just you know, get out of the house."

Jayson clarified that nothing was ever "truly awful. The whole thing was that it was just generally uncomfortable because you weren't used to all the things that you're getting put through. And the homesickness. And the food was weird." As the school was residential, children would be staying with other families—and some homes would feel very different, especially to the younger children. As Jayson put it, "There was bound to be one or two of the houses that just, you know, it just didn't feel quite right."

The sense of responsibility to take care of, and watch out for, the youngest children was a defining part of the school for some participants.

For Rebecca, "Sometimes being in the Community School was feeling responsible because you were one of the oldest of this whole pack of kids. So sometimes, it just felt responsible. Sometimes it felt cold and hungry." She wished her memories could be of camaraderie and safety, though those are not the feelings she remembers. "I want all those warm

fuzzy things to be what I say, but it was a little survival of the fittest. You learned how to attach yourself to the adults that could help you and keep you safe."

At least some of the younger students were also keenly aware of the responsibility held by the older ones. Younger participants, like Sandi, weighed in on their feelings of safety among the other children: "At school I never felt lonely, I mean, there's always family around, right? Really, it felt like a big family. It just felt normal, I guess because that was our normal. That was life." That is not to say that it always felt peaceful. One of the youngest kids in the Community School, Heidi, recalls the older children looking after the younger ones. She reflected that while she felt looked after, it was not always tranquil:

> As much as there may have been teasing and antagonism, you still looked out for one another. In that sense, it felt safe. It didn't mean they didn't torment us, but they made sure we were okay. Some more than others, right? There were definitely some of the older kids that kind of took on responsibility roles.

Chores—This Is School?

David remembers feeling as though the students were, in his words, providing free labour for host families. "I remember [some of the adults] really putting us to do chores around the place." David did not live on a farm, and he was not accustomed to farm work. "We didn't have animals or anything like that. They would put us to work learning how to harness a horse or pony, feed the animals and look after them." He did not mind learning about caring for the farm animals, but he drew a line at mucking out the barn. "I remember having to shovel pig shit out of one of the barns. I was like, "this is school!?'" David had attended mainstream public school prior to joining the Community School and this did not match up with his expectations of school.

> I told [my mother] and she probably laughed it off—said it would build character, which it probably did. It was probably good for me in a way, but there were some days when I was a bit angry. Like, "what? I don't want to be part of this!"

What qualified things as "school," and what did not, can be seen through the eyes of the beholder. Is mucking out the barn a learning opportunity or is it, as David described, "free child labour?" These kinds of questions were also subjects of frequent debate among parent-teachers. In particular, one parent-teacher, Barney, held polarizing perspectives from many of the other parent-teachers on the purpose of education. Ish (teacher) recalls,

> He thought that what was taught in mainstream education was largely irrelevant to what really mattered in life. And what really mattered in life was being able to farm and work and survive in a place like [this]. Kathy and I certainly didn't feel that way. We felt that kids had to deal with the world as it is. Which includes public schools, and employers, and people who judge you based on how you talk and . . . it was a debate.

These debates, discussions, and decisions were reflected in the lessons taught by parent-teachers. They were also reflected in what educators considered "school" to be, what students considered "school," and in how "school" appeared to outsiders/onlookers. There would be times when those unaccustomed to the Community School might wonder whether some of the activities could be characterized as school at all. This story from *Natural Life Magazine* exemplifies the difficulty the untrained eye could have in recognizing lunch (or school):

> It's almost noon on an early June Friday and a car pulls into the farmyard. A woman accompanied by a small child gets out. She's come to look over the Community School to decide whether or not she will become part of it. She watches incredulously and suddenly you see the scene through her eyes: Five very dirty, half-clad children

> of indeterminate sex are chasing each other around through a flock of chickens. Two more are pulling weeds from the ground and hurling them, dirt and all, into an earthenware bowl.
>
> The woman walks over to the table and asks what they're doing. "Making lunch," they reply briefly. And unless she looks carefully and knows a lot about edible wild plants, she'll never know that it really is lunch. Or at least will be. (Poff 1979, p. 44)

The school did not look like a conventional school. It took place in family homes and on farms. As students, we learned unconventional subjects as well as conventional ones. Students did not learn only in conventional subject areas and students were not assessed in a conventional manner. Learning was of utmost importance to the teacher-parents, who approached school by thinking deeply about what kids needed to learn and to know. Sylvia (parent-teacher) addressed this explicitly, rejecting any notion that parents in the Community School took a laissez-faire approach to learning. "We were just as concerned for our kids to learn as any parent."

Transitions Between Mainstream and Community School

As most of the children spent at least some time in the mainstream-school system, the ability to switch between systems was seen as essential by many parents. For most parents, this included having the knowledge and skills required to succeed in conventional school. It was important that they could be successful in mainstream school. Back in 1979, McCaffrey wrote about those transitions:

> A girl who had been in our school two years went to first grade at the public school, was given third year work, and at the start of her second year asked to come back to our school. I learned all of that stuff last year. She has now been with us since a 10-year-old now with few signs of boredom. (as cited in Farenga, p. 9)

Several student participants shared their memories of transitioning to mainstream school. They did not report feeling behind academically. Heidi, reflecting on her own transition between schools, wondered if her age was part of the reason she felt prepared for mainstream school.

> Lots of our education was actually really good. We learned a lot; we were exposed to a lot of interesting things. For me, particularly because I was so young through most of it, I didn't end up with that feeling that some people had—that they missed out on some of the important stuff. I went into the public-school system for the first time in Grade 1 where, you know, if you figured out how to not eat paste, you're doing good.

Both Heidi and her sister, Kelly, moved between mainstream, homeschooling, and the Community School several times throughout their elementary-school years. Each time, they found that their academic skills held up well to the expectations of mainstream teachers.

Other students who transitioned also found their academic skills to be strong when held up against mainstream standards and expectations. Rebecca entered public school partway through Grade 5 and stayed for the remainder of the school year. The following September, she was placed into Grade 7 rather than Grade 6, in recognition of the strength of her academic skills and knowledge.

> I must have learned enough academic stuff because when I was mainstreamed, I skipped a grade and I managed to be successful in life. I was only in public school for two-and-a-half or maybe three years of elementary school. So clearly, something in the Community School worked academically.

Similarly, when I think back to my own transition to public school, I did not feel that I was behind. Perhaps this is because, like Heidi, I was very young, entering public school midway through Grade 1. I completed Grade 1 and Grade 2, then was placed in Grade 4, "skipping"

Grade 3. While in Grade 4, one of my teachers felt I was still performing at a level that was beyond my grade assignment and asked my mother for permission to have me to be tested for giftedness.

Given her commitment to alternative schooling, which did not include categorization and labelling, it is perhaps no surprise that my mother refused permission for the standardized testing. As I recall, she told the principal that if they could not figure out whether I was gifted without assessments, then she guessed that was too bad for me. She was unequivocal; I was not participating in any of their testing. Ultimately, I was placed in the program for gifted students, without any assessments. I enjoyed the program for gifted students throughout my elementary-school years.

Alongside these stories of success, sometimes students did face skill gaps. For example, Bern shared the story of her daughter's transition to high school. At a parent night, one of the mainstream teachers approached Bern and let her know that her daughter was struggling in class.

> The teacher said, "Well, I don't really understand. She's obviously really bright and she participates in class and all of that. But she doesn't seem to be able to write." I said, "That's because she's coming out of the Community School, and they didn't do a lot of writing. So that doesn't surprise me."

This student had earlier switched to public school and had been successful in gifted programming. While she struggled initially with high-school writing expectations, she caught up in the class and continued with her studies. This reflects the belief shared by Sylvia, "We found that if you don't bug people about stuff and you let them go at their own rate, they usually catch up."

I am not suggesting that I could make any generalized statements that all of the students who learned in the Community School would have been found to have heightened conventional skills in mainstream school. Not all of the former students saw academic skill building as a strength of the school. For example, Jayson shared,

> I remember bouncing around from house to house, trying to learn things and I remember the experiences. Education-wise, I would probably give it a three on a scale of one to ten. But for personality-building and just, you know, practicing one's instincts and figuring out how to problem solve different things, it was pretty good. I'd give it a nine. I think it built character. I think I would have been a different person if I didn't do it.

Most participants shared that they found themselves to be well-prepared for the academic challenges in the mainstream system.

Fitting In? That Is a Different Question Altogether

Academic skill is only one of the factors influencing children's successful entry into mainstream schools. Participants invariably described the transition from one system to the other as challenging or difficult. That "ragtag bunch of crazy kids, full of vim and vigor, and a bit of attitude" that David described did not always fit smoothly into established peer groups in public schools. The barriers participants talked about when entering mainstream schools were not academic; they were social and cultural.

Sandi left the Community School at about age 9 to attend another alternative school where her mother was a teacher. Sandi decided to enter public school for Grade 8 because, she said, she wanted to "understand the system" before starting high school in Grade 9. She reflected on entering mainstream schooling for the first time.

> I don't remember feeling behind at all academically. I did, however, feel totally not caught up on pop-culture type things. I always felt like, "I have no idea what people are talking about."
>
> Some of the educational parts, I just found silly. "You must underline this or that in red pen," and "You must put the headline [there] and put the date over here." I thought that was pretty ridiculous. I don't remember thinking like, "I have no idea what I'm doing." It was just the little things like that. The formality of it all.

Similarly, for sisters Kelly and Heidi, while they did not have academic difficulty, they continued to be challenged each time as they found their place in a new school. Kelly remembers the first time she entered public school.

> It was traumatic, painful [*laughs*]. I was the hippie kid. I brought strange things in my lunch. I was the new kid on the block in Grade 4. And you know, there were all of these things that everybody knew about. They knew what recess was, that it started with this bell and ended with that bell. It was kind of like being put on Mars.

Jayson, looking back at the transition to public school, recognized that he was entering a very different world than he was leaving. The conservative community housing the public school included an avid hunting culture. Hunters wear high-visibility blaze orange during big game season, as moose and deer are unable to see colour. While provincial-government regulations made wearing blaze orange mandatory in the 1990s (Goldsmith, 2016, para 1), it was already commonplace in the 1980s when Jayson's family came to register him in the mainstream-school system.

> Remember, my parents were members of a cult. They worshipped a guy named Bhagwan Rajneesh. They dressed in orange so that added to everything. So there are my parents

> standing outside of the public school, trying to enrol me, and they are both dressed in orange and it wasn't hunting season. So yeah, there was a transition between the mainstream and the alternative school.

Every single student participant who attended mainstream school talked about how difficult it was to move from the Community School to the mainstream system. They did not generally talk about feeling behind academically. They spoke about how they did not feel they fit in with the mainstream kids, since their experiences were so different from those of their new classmates. Jayson reflected on this division:

> I think we just scared them. Yeah, we got bullied. Fuck yeah. I had to defend my sister, and she had to defend me. Same thing with you and your sister and everybody else. The enemy in all of this was just differences in people.

David had been attending Grade 6 in a public school when he joined the Community School. He had not been happy in public school and shared that he "was getting less so as time went on," so he decided to try out the Community School. David stayed in the Community School until he entered high school in Grade 9.

> When I went into [mainstream] high school, it was very difficult. And I never recovered exactly. It was very strange seeing/running into kids that I had gone to public school with [before joining the Community School]. I could not relate. I remember trying to reconnect with them a little bit. In a few cases, I sort of could, but they definitely looked at me like "Where have you been, like, what's going on here?" At least partly because of my time in the free school, I was so different. I left in Grade 10 or 11, and I moved to Toronto and stayed with my dad. He showed me around some mainstream high schools and I just was not interested. Eventually I found an alternative school in Toronto.

The challenge facing students transitioning from such an unusual schooling experience as that of the Community School has stayed with many of us. Participants reflected on the division created due to kids' differing backgrounds. David put it this way, "I mean we were part of the alternative movement up there, right? Some to more or less of a degree, I guess. There was that real schism out there between the locals and the hippie culture."

I recall experiencing othering and putting down of the "hippie kids" who came from alternative-schooling environments. I remember how this played out in my Grade 1 art class. The task was to draw a picture of an activity we had done with our families. I drew a picture of our recent family trip to Florida. I remember drawing the sun to show how hot it was. Instead of the drawing the sunrays aiming away from the circle, they ringed the sun.

I was so proud of the drawing. I was, at least, until one of the other students dismissed my drawing—and me—by telling everyone in the class I was lying. I could not have gone to Florida, he said, since I was just a hippie. "And everyone knows," he said, "that hippies are too poor and too dirty to go to Florida." Even now, I find myself justifying—wanting to shout out that I went with my family on that trip to Florida. This young boy was reacting to difference. And to him, I guess we sure did seem different.

For those of us who moved into the mainstream, adjustments were made, understandings were built. The transition was a process, as participant stories have suggested. Looking back, those transitions have stayed with participants, for whom part of the school experience is remembered as challenges.

Looking Back

I asked the participants—parent-teacher and former students—if they had feelings of regret about attending the Community School. I wondered how do they think/feel about that

experience now, looking back. For most, it was not a black-and-white answer. Sandi expressed it this way, “I mean everybody has weird and different things in their lives. I wouldn’t do it any differently. I think it was what made me who I am today. For sure there’s drawbacks, but there’s also benefits.”

While David felt he never fully recovered from his transition into high school, he also saw benefits from his experiences. He does not look back at his Community School experience with rose-coloured glasses, but he is grateful for the unique experiences.

“I was definitely a social hippie outcast and had a pretty hard time of it. But at the same time, when I think about it, if there was a do-over? I’m not sure I would want to miss out on the interesting, fascinating time I had at the free school.” Similarly, Jayson shared that he would not trade in his Community School experience. “Would I choose to do something different? I’d say no. If I could change that today, I’d say no.”

The feelings for participants looking back at their Community School experiences are not straightforward. While one participant did not exactly wish the experience away, her mixed feelings about the impacts of the Community School are clear: “Would I change it so I didn’t have to have that experience? No, because then I wouldn’t be who I am. Do I wish it didn’t feel like it gutted me and destroyed me? Yeah, I really do wish that.”

Of course, had these students not attended the Community School and not had these unusual experiences, they might still feel the same way about their childhoods. Like all complex human emotions and relationships, it is complicated. As one of the students said, “I don’t know if this is the way I always would have been, regardless of my upbringing and it’s just my nature.”

So, what other things did the students of the Community School take away from their experiences, aside from the mixed feelings and unusual learning opportunities? Participants

shared that they learned more than academic skills, more than knowing how to saddle a horse, meditate, and make quill pens from feathers. Kelly shares one of the bigger lessons she took away:

> I think the Community School taught me not to necessarily measure myself by all the same sticks that everybody uses to measure things. I'm exactly where I wanted to be in my life. And I definitely think that there's something about the community/free school, which allows me to feel like I have accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. That I've gotten to where I wanted to get to, though I don't necessarily use the same tape measures.

As I've shared throughout, participants learned about different ways of living; we learned that we could do hard things. We learned to be bigger than we seemed. We learned about standing our ground, about supporting each other, about being responsible for each other.

Perhaps that would be music to the ears of the parent-teachers, who were hoping for exactly that kind outcome. Bern put it this way: "We had a different definition of success. Even for ourselves." The goal was to set the children up to be able to make their own choices for their own lives. Bern continued, "And not predetermining what they were going to be, or what they were going to do. That might be a naïve point of view. But, oh well."

At the time of the school's inception, the parent-teachers were young idealists. They were taking political stances and going against the grain of societal expectations by opening their own little school. I wondered if, in looking back, they had regrets about those decisions. I wondered if their perspectives on those decisions had changed over time.

Sylvia remembers:

> We just jumped with in two feet; we had no idea what we were jumping into. But we jumped. And I'm not sorry about that. I call it the leap of faith. I'm very proud of all of

> you guys. Every one of you, each in your own way, have learned stuff that has taken you forward. That's how you change the world. You all have children of your own that keeps multiplying the base. I guess we really were trying to change the world.

Perspectives did change over time, both throughout the school time and in the years following. It was not always the same thing for everyone. Nor was it the same for any one person over time. Kathy shared: "I know I thought I wanted the kids to have something better. That was a big part of it. It wasn't solely idealistic at all as far as making the world a better place through the school." For Kathy and for many of the parent-teachers, it was really about both in the end—making the world a different place looking into the future by making their and their children's lives a different place in the school and community at that present time. Kathy reflected,

> I would say it was more to bring happiness or beauty. To have a beautiful life for the kids, and allow them to learn and become whatever they want it to be. There were politics involved, of course, in the idea that I didn't like what schools were doing. But I never thought that our little school was going to change the world. I thought our little school was about having a beautiful little school.

Ish and Kathy had been explicit about how they thought things needed to change when they arrived in their newly adopted community. It was Kathy's hope that the school might show other like-minded people there are other ways of doing things. "I knew we were just one little school. I did hope that some of our work could become examples for others." Bern equivocated less in her answer:

> I actually think it had more to do with the reformation of society. In some ways, the kids may well have been happier going to public school. You know, like, they'd have more friends and they'd learn the social stuff better than they would have had in the

> Community School. Rather than their happiness, I think it had more to do with their mental health. Maybe that's the same thing, I don't know.

Whether they were trying to change the world or trying to change our world through this beautiful little school, I have often marvelled at the bold decisions made by the parents who, against the grain of societal expectations, established and ran the Community School. I will close this chapter with a quote from my mother's article. It seems that they may have been grappling with many of the same questions in the school as I am grappling with in this dissertation.

> On a good day, you can remember why you're doing it. Or one of the children reminds you.
>
> It's a cold February evening and two parents, accompanied by two children, are driving into Pembroke to hear a speech by Education Minister Thomas Welles. "Who is he anyway?" Blaise demands. "He's the man responsible for education in all Ontario," his father replies. "You mean in Toronto too? And Killaloe? And Sudbury?" Blaise asks wonderingly. "That's right." "Then he must have a thousand heads," Blaise says firmly. You laugh and for just a minute, you think maybe you're not taking that big a risk with your child's future. (Poff, 1979, p. 46)

Epilogue to the Story

I set out to explore, through narrative, participants' experiences and memories about the Community School and to share how they feel about those experiences now. They generously shared how the Community School experiences affected them and shared their often mixed emotions about aspects of the school. In many ways, the school was an experiment of learning, for both students and teachers, and an extension of the lifestyles of the families outside of the school.

The research explored why parents and students came to be involved in the Community School and how those decisions about leaving or entering mainstream impacted them. Many of the student participants discussed challenges they faced when moving from the alternative environment to the mainstream and struggled with feeling like they "fit in." This feeling of "other" has stayed with several of us for the many years following our own departure from the school.

Following the closure of the school, four of the ten participants went on to attend a faculty of education and work full careers as educators in mainstream schools—three in elementary, one in secondary. Each of these teachers expressed frustrations regarding the constraints of working within the system. As a mainstream educator, I wanted to explore different ways of teaching and learning. I wondered if I can learn about kinder, gentler ways to teach and work with children in schools. Let's turn to that reflection now.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

Since the spring of 2020, COVID-19 has challenged us to do things differently. Its challenges to our assumptions invite us to *see* things differently. As we make school decisions looking forward, I believe our first question should always be, "What do we want children to remember from this time?" I ask this question in the face of the current challenges facing education, but it should not be isolated to learning during and after the global-healthcare crisis.

"'We teach who we are' in times of darkness as well as light" (Palmer, 2017, p. 3). Sometimes transformation feels like a decision, and those instances can feel contrived. Other times, it feels as though the path was cleared for you; in those moments, transformation feels like an invitation. We grow when we pay attention to the invitations—when we notice them. In the midst of the fourth wave of the COVID pandemic, it is indeed a time of darkness. With that darkness comes an invitation to see things differently.

Critical pedagogues have long been calling for sweeping changes to mainstream schooling. Some traditional supporters of mainstream education have taken up the challenge in the light cast by the pandemic. Champion of mainstream school and former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Michael Fullan (2020) now challenges the myth of school as a liberating experience for all children.

> Without question, education systems were in a state of stagnation before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was clear that schools increasingly were not serving the needs of most students and they were not preparing them for the 21st century. Alongside this, other issues were worsening, the most prominent being climate change, and extreme and galloping inequity across the world." (p. 26)

Fullan (2020) now sees potential for systemic change in the post-pandemic world to what he calls the stagnant system of education. While Fullan and I might not agree about our visions of post-pandemic school, I agree that renewal and reimagining are necessary. As a principal in the final days of 2021, I find myself asking if we are ready to meet this moment. I wonder: What can we take forward from the stories of the Community School of the 1970s and 1980s?

How can we bring the stories of the 1970s and 80s into the current context? Like John Holt, my optimism about the ability of schools to be the great equalizer ebbs and flows. As I continue to work within the constraints of the bureaucracy of mainstream school, A.S. Neill's words resonate deeply with me. Neill (1968), founder of the Summerhill Free School said, "Hating compromise as I do, I have to compromise here, realizing that my primary job is not the reformation of society, but the bringing of happiness to some few children" (p. 26).

I have spent my career in that dichotomy. I have always believed that we need a societal push for change from within the bureaucracy and we need to push for change from the outside as well. I began this dissertation by stating that I am driven to explore ways that we can serve kids differently. The disconnect between my philosophy of living and learning and what I see transpiring in schools everyday is what challenged me to look back over my own educational experiences and ask, Is there another way? I asked myself if I can be a part of the reformation of the education system from within—as Michael Fullan would challenge us to be—and if I can challenge the galloping inequities. Or, do I believe, as John Holt came to believe, that the reformation of education within school is simply impossible?

Have I reached that turning point where I walk away from mainstream school? Can I continue to look for ways to bring joy to the few children in my care? I, of course, am not alone in feeling constrained by the system. When I asked Sandi (a former student and current high-

school teacher) how the experience of the Community School influences her life now, she reflected on her current role as a teacher and her frustration at the lack of any meaningful change:

> Our parents knew, way back then, that the system was messed. It hasn't changed. That's the worst part. From when they lived through it to now, nothing has changed. It's the same system. We're still trying to train kids to listen, and comply, and be factory workers in our industrial system. How is it that it hasn't changed? It blows me away.

Growing Success, Ontario's guiding document for assessment in education, outlines the requirements for students who have not passed a course and require support in attaining the credit. "Programs must be pedagogically sound and have real and credible educational value. The integrity of the recovered credit must be preserved by the student demonstrating achievement of the overall course expectations" (Government of Ontario, 2010, p. 85).

In her current role, Sandi supports struggling high-school students, and she spoke of the irony of following this guideline. "I keep hearing about the integrity of the credit. It's not about what's best for this kid, to get them through to the next step, get them successful and feeling good. It's about protecting the integrity of the credit." Rather than focusing on maintaining integrity for the student, the focus is on academics for students.

> You have kids that are coming from foster care and poverty, and they're suicidal and can barely function. And we're trying to shove the academics down their throat. We are missing out on a bunch of the kids in the system—not recognizing where they're at.

In the opening chapter, I spoke of research that shows increased stress and anxiety that students feel during the school year. When we do not have meaningful relationships with the

children we work with, if we fail to recognize where children are at, we risk missing meeting their human needs. Because, at its core, teaching is and always has been relational work.

Another former student who now works as a mainstream educator also lamented the slow pace of change. She spoke of the influence that radical fringe movements can have on systems, where that radical fringe works to drag the centre—where the mainstream can "take the little bits that that radical fringe did that are comfortable enough, definable enough, and prescribable enough that you can systematize them." The Community School was a part of one of those radical fringes.

> The school was a radical edge that dragged the centre. And it's taken decades for some of the foundational pedagogical concepts that were experimented with to get into the mainstream-education system. A bunch of them aren't here yet. I can see them coming like a slow-moving storm on the horizon, that's taking longer than my entire fucking lifetime to get here.

David looked back upon his learning in the Community School, connecting that learning to the learning of his own child today. He spoke about how mainstream schools do not make much sense to him and reflected on priorities of his son's school.

> All of the things they consider to be important, don't seem that way. It's clear that a lot of it—they're just doing because they need to fill the day up with stuff. Most of it won't ever be used or be practical. There was a lot more practical stuff in the free school. And there were things from an artistic point of view as well. I am a big believer in pushing the creative side of our nature into older age.

David recollected the ubiquitous nature of the arts in the Community School; we took lessons in music, calligraphy, and pottery making. These skills were very different from

mainstream school "where it seems very mechanical and where you just have to learn it all by memorization."

Those early schooling experiences, where the whole child—mind, body, spirit, and emotion—were taken into account, may have lessons for this post-pandemic world. This journey has taken me full circle from my early learning experiences, back around to my current role as an administrator in mainstream schools. Along the way, the pandemic has provided the gift of seeing education and learning in new ways.

During the COVID-19 school shut down, I was interviewing former Community School students and their families, and at the same time, I found myself counselling current mainstream students and their families that learning does not only take place in a classroom—whether that classroom is bricks and mortar or is virtual. Through the school closures, as a principal, I encouraged kids to learn with their families who were hatching chicks, planting gardens, growing their own businesses, fishing, reading together—living and learning together in ways they never had the opportunity to before. Their stories of learning are reminiscent of the stories shared by members of the Community School.

As an adult, a feminist, a holistic educator, and a critical pedagogue, I am fascinated by the bold choices made by my parents, and other adults, in creating the Community School for their children. I wonder, as a principal today, what I can learn from their choices? How can I continue to grow as an educator and a person—and hold on to those lessons learned—to love learning and to embrace curiosity as a core value? It is my hope that this journey will resonate with others and that they may find it to be a worthwhile endeavour to think about learning in other ways, both inside and outside of the mainstream. However, I will leave it to the readers to determine if it is useful in their own learning. I thank you for joining me on my journey.

As I write, the pandemic is not finished—we are in the midst of the fourth wave. My learning journey is also unfinished, as I am unfinished. I continue to teach in the halls and classrooms of mainstream schools, always looking for different ways to teach, learn, and grow with the children with whom I am lucky enough to spend each day.

Maybe there will come a time when I feel I have to leave mainstream education to continue my work. For now, I will remain in mainstream education, questioning, challenging, pushing.

For now, I am unfinished. And I can let that be.

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Appendix A—Sample Questions

Individual interview Questions: Students

1. Do you have any favourite stories/memories about your time in Free School?
2. Describe a typical Free School day
3. Why do you think your parents put you in the community/Free School? Mainstream school?
4. If you did, why did you leave Free School?

Mind

5. What do you remember learning about in the Free School?
6. How did you know you were learning?
7. How were decisions made in the school?
8. Do you remember having any control over what you learned?

Body

9. Where/what did you eat at school? Did the adults eat with you?
10. Were you involved in food prep & decision-making around food?
11. Was school very physically active?

Spirit

12. How do you define success in school? In what ways do you consider yourself successful?
13. Do you feel the Free School set you up for success later in life? In what way/why not?
14. What do you believe is the purpose of schooling? How was this purpose reflected in your work?

Emotion

15. Did you feel prepared for Free Schooling? mainstream schooling?
16. Why do you think your parents put you in/out of the Free School?
17. Do you feel you learned what you 'needed' to learn?
18. What do you remember about what it felt like to be at the Free School?
19. To leave the Free School?

Teacher/Parents

1. Why was it sometimes called the Free School & sometimes called the Community School?
2. How long were you involved in the community/Free School?
3. How did you learn about/become involved in the Free School?

4. If you did, why did you leave Free School?

5. Describe a typical Free School day
6. Do you have any favourite stories/memories about your time in Free School?
7. Why did you put your child(ren) in Free School?
8. Where did you teach at the Free School?

Mind

9. What subjects do you remember teaching in the Free School?
10. How did you know the children were learning?
11. How was it decided what kids should learn? And who was teaching it?
12. How were decisions made in the school?
13. Did you have any control over what you taught? Who decided?
14. Was there an established curriculum?

Body

15. Was school very physically active?
16. Where/what did kids eat at school? Did you eat with the kids?
17. Were they involved in food prep & decision-making around food?

Spirit

18. Was children's spirit nourished in the Free School? If so, how?
19. Do you feel the Free School set kids up for success later in life? In what way/why not?
20. What do you believe is the purpose of schooling? How was this reflected in the Free School?

Emotion

21. How did you know your children would learn what they 'needed' to learn?
22. What do you remember about what it felt like to be a part of the Free School?
23. To leave the Free School? Everyone Is there anything you wish I had asked and didn't ask? Anything to suggest I add to the list? Anyone else I should speak with?

Teacher/Parents only A.S. Neill, founder of the Summerhill School said, "[h]ating compromise as I do, I have to compromise here, realizing that my primary job is not the reformation of society, but the bringing of happiness to some few children" (Neill, 1960, p. 26).

Looking back, as a Free School teacher-parent, what would you have said the primary job of the Free School was—the reformation of school or the happiness of the children in your care? In hindsight, does your answer change?

Emerging questions:
Were you reading anyone's work about Free Schools/alternative schools? (e.g., Ivan Illich, John Holt, George Denisson, AS Neill of Summerhill?)

Did you come to organizing/originating the Killaloe Community/Free School came from an urban environments as a part of the back-to-the-land movement? A politicized environment of the 1960s?

Was the decision to put your children in the Community/Free School a political one—an effort to offer an alternative to mainstream schooling for their children?

Were you interested in a reframing about how society saw children and schooling?

As the time did you see a path forward existing outside of the mainstream—outside of mainstream school and mainstream culture?

Would you say the school was a part of a greater push to societal disruption and change?

Appendix B—Participants

Students	**Parent-Teachers (interviewed)**
Heidi	Sylvia
Jessica (author)	Kathy
Kelly	Bernadine
Gabriel	Ish
Jayson	**Parent-Teachers (cited)**
Sandi	Kathlyn (writer, author's mother)
Rebecca	Barney (writer, teacher at First Street School)
David	