

BE MESSY: SEEING THE IDEAL IN TEACHING

by

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Abstract

This autoethnography explores how a school district perceived the ideal student, given a close reading of district documents; and how I, as a parent and teacher, responded to as well as perpetuated notions of this ideal, much to the detriment of real parent involvement in the education of children.

Keywords: autoethnography, ideal in education

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PROLOGUE

Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.

—Henry David Thoreau

Getting lost in oneself seemed to be one of the vital steps to unpacking who I am as mother and educator. I was recently looking at my eldest son's school records. I found a yellow and faded piece of newsprint that I kept from when he was about two years old. I am not a saver or particularly sentimental. I don't scrapbook. When I first read it, it spoke volumes to me as to what being the parent of a child who has special needs means. I did not come to realize what place it would play in my teaching and my choices as a teacher researcher. I did not realize that the words and spirit of this tattered piece of paper would become part of a thesis that would define my practice as an educator:

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum, the Sistine Chapel, Gondolas. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. After several months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland!" "Holland?" you say. "What do you mean, Holland? I signed up for Italy. I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy." But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place full of pestilence, famine, and disease. It's just a different place. So, you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met. It's just a different place. It's slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around. You begin to notice that Holland has windmills. Holland has tulips. And Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned."

And the pain of that experience will never, ever, ever, go away. The loss of that dream is a very significant loss. But if you spend your life mourning the fact that

you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland.

—Emily Perl Kingsley, “Welcome to Holland”

Talking to Dr. Manning: The Beginnings of the Idea

“We need to nail down the genre of your thesis. I it seems like you keep coming back to ethnography” (Andrew Manning, thesis committee meeting, Summer Institute, 2010). How does a master's thesis become a conduit to situate my practice? The answer to this seems simple; my thesis was never divorced from my practice as a teacher. My applications for entrance into Mount St. Vincent University included a brief essay that began with the phrase “literacy is the language of learning.” Language has long been my passion. What it all seems to be coming down to is a single question that keeps reoccurring. A few simple words that don't seem to have the punch I envisioned my thesis question should possess. How could a master's thesis be about what I do? Why would one teacher matter?

The process of arriving at my question and methodology are simpatico with the topic itself; why I do what I do as an educator? How does my identity and profession intersect? What positions me as a teacher and learner? And, so what? What power do the words I use have in creating dialogue in my classroom? Unpacking how I have come to the methodology and question—situating myself and my practice, understanding the positioning of learning—has become a part of the thesis itself.

At Stage West in Mississauga, Andrew Manning made an announcement to the assembled learners asking if anyone was interested in writing and researching a thesis and, if so could we meet to discuss the process. I elected to attend. He asked us to take time to think of what we would research, what was our burning question. I have, for as

long as I can remember, been fascinated by words and their power. So, I set out to write a question worthy of this academic process. What follows is an email conversation between Dr. Manning and me. I can't "prove it" but I think I am learning to talk to myself. The electronic dialogue formally began in the summer of 2009 and still continues.

Betty: I would like to analyze the use of language within my school as a factor of both inclusion and exclusion.

Dr. Manning: This is broad so I'm going to suggest that you think about keeping your analysis to textual material, memo's, policy documents, inservice materials, etc. You'd be doing discourse analysis on the documents

Betty: After Saturday I think I have the whole idea I want to explore. I want to contact three schools and analyze the documents they send home to do an analysis of their Discourse/identity.

Dr. Manning: This sounds really interesting - how do you intend to collect this data? Over what period of time?

Betty: But! After Saturday I want to include a new wrinkle. I want to include my own perceptions (as if I could not) as part of the lens. Is it impossible/too much to do an autoethnography as a parent who raised a son with identified special needs?

Dr. Manning: Maybe—we need to talk this through and see how it fits in with discourse the analysis.

Betty: This has led to what has become my research question: What role does language play in the process of inclusion/exclusion? How does the language of school communication impact the reader?

Dr. Manning: The research question does not flow from this intro—it is too broad.

Betty: Language is not neutral. Communication is not neutral. My question is: Who am I as a teacher? What do I do as a teacher as a result of the lens of special needs parent?

Dr. Manning: Yes, you are closer. You just need a clearer question.

Betty: Language is not neutral. Communication is not neutral. My question is: How does being a special needs parent locate me as a teacher?

Dr. Manning: OK. I like the word *locate*. I think it's ready to send off to Jerry and Vivian and we can meet with them on the 12th.

Betty: Where should I go next?

Dr. Manning: You're the researcher—what do you think? I have no problem with the way you're using the documents. My question to you would be: Is this discourse analysis?

Betty: We want to foster a home/school connection and the deficit model does not do this .s. .it could not possibly do this. The language of school and family seems to create an adversarial situation. How can we? And, more to the point do I?

Dr. Manning: OK. Here you have a research question that your data will answer.

What data do you have that show that the language of school and family seems to create an adversarial situation?

As I looked more closely at my data I realized that the adversarial process happened from within. This thesis therefore explored the concept of the ideal in education from my perspectives as a parent and a teacher. I examined the ideal, to see how it was conveyed and what my role was in its construction. This question that sounds blissfully simple but through it I was able to unpack me as an educator. It was a process of situating the self. It was the blending of personal narrative and qualitative research with the goal of transforming what I do; making reflection become reflexive action.

The Journey Begins: Mother and Teacher

I became a mother at 20. I came to a paid teaching position at 38. I told my first principal that I was “age enhanced” since “mature” implied a status I was not sure I possessed. She consistently reminded me that being new to teaching and new to life were two different points of view. In time I came to understand that I was a parent of a child with special needs. It was not until our son Patrick was almost seven that we would have a medically interpreted picture of who our son is. Patrick’s diagnostic identity includes very mild Asperger’s syndrome as well as a form of dyslexia. His younger brother would later be labelled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This first role of teacher (albeit unpaid) would be as a very big influence on my identity as a classroom educator. Language, especially the language that implies deficit would become an important aspect of how I do what I do. When I began to teach it was with the idea that I was bilingual; I spoke both the language of learning and parenting. My children were perfect, I understood that this is a natural view of parenting.

I have grown to know I am the parent of an exceptional person who happens to have a diagnostic identity. I became keenly aware of the power of words. As Patrick’s mother I learned that words can cause pain. I fought against such language. Words could and would define, box, or liberate myself, my family, and especially my child.

CHAPTER 1
LEARNING IS MESSY BUSINESS



Figure 1. “Be messy.”

In the fall of 2010 I was teaching at a Peel District Public School Board in a Grade 1/2 classroom. Early in the school year someone created a rather poignant and captivating piece of graffiti. In very stenciled letters the words “BE MESSY” were scripted amid a flurry of colours all in vibrant pastel tones. I mourned its passing as it was power-washed from the side of the building. It occurred to me that these two simple words and an electric display of colour are great visual metaphors for teaching and my

thesis. Teaching is messy, learning is messy. It is a blending of personal narratives of teachers, students, and the pedagogy of the profession. In its very essence teaching and learning are messy. Yet we spend much of our time trying to categorize people and learning into neat, organized boxes creating an ideal that does not actually exist. We project a neat and tidy ideal of education:

- The perfect learner: ready to absorb and participate in learning; compliant and attentive
- The teacher: drawing the attention of each student to the learning at hand; all-knowing and ready for everything
- The family: ready to support the school and the child in the activity of being a student. They read with their children, pack nutritious lunches, and attend all meetings eager to see how they can participate in their child's learning.

What if the ideal is a myth we are told and tell ourselves? What if it is a myth we accept and believe without acknowledgment? This thesis explores the concept of the ideal in education through perspective as a parent and a teacher. While unpacking my identity as a parent and a teacher, I will examine the ideal, to see how it is conveyed and what my role is within it.

The Ideal as a Construct

According to Dorothy Smith (1999),

It is the concept of the family as a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment: his earnings provide the economic basis of the family household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children. (p. 159)

This may sound like a description of a 1950s television drama but what became of interest to me throughout the process of this thesis was that this image was still an active perception portrayed across many mediums.

As a parent and as a teacher the concept of what constitutes an ideal student and family were of interest. Media presents a visage of the ideal family. Communication through electronic means such as websites shows through word and image what the ideal parent and child are. In the classroom yet another picture of the ideal is presented. The relationship between classroom and family and child support and interrupt this image. The ideal parent is involved in their child's schooling, active and engaged. The ideal parent matches their actions and words to the needs of the school as they are defined by the school. (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2000; Prins & Toso, 2008; Reay, 1998). Similarly there are expectations both implicitly and explicitly stated of what is required of the ideal student. The ideal student is compliant and engaged with a positive attitude towards learning. (Comber, 1997). How do these presupposed ideals impact the learner, family and the learning environment?

The family plays a central role in the expression of the core values of civil society and as such has become a key site of struggle over cultural values surrounding social hierarchies of class, race, nationhood, sexual morality, child socialization, which can be articulated as characteristics of the tensions between tradition and modernity. (Chambers, 2001, p. 43)

Do tensions exist between what we project as the ideal family and the reality of what family is in actuality?

Not only was this thesis an exploration of the concept of the ideal in education from my perspectives as a parent and a teacher, it also explored the influence and presence of the ideal and its impact on my perceptions as a parent and teacher and how the ideal was constructed in my own practice.

Methodology

Sweeping Me Out From Under the Rug

When I hear myself speak and consider what I write, my thinking is invaded by the words of one of my professors, Dr. Blye Frank, who stressed three simple yet powerful words: “location, location, location.” To sort my way through this messy business I need to define my location. I am a situated self. Would understanding my identity bring about a more reflexive practice? Does the concept of the ideal image of student, teacher, and parent impact what I do? The process is a complex one (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

When I was considering the idea of the teacher as a researcher it conjured memories from my undergraduate degree in psychology at the University of Windsor and the value that was assigned to research by my professors. I was afforded the opportunity to write a thesis and elected not to do so as I did not feel this was my journey to take at that time. The idea terrified me. In *Qualitative Data Analysis*, a book by Miles and Huberman (1994), researcher Kerlinger explained that there are no qualitative data; everything is either 1 or 0. Quantitative research when held in opposition to qualitative research has been considered by some the least contentious of the two research paradigms as it is more closely aligned with what is viewed as the classical science. To my knowledge quantitative research was the only type of research ever explored in psychology at the University of Windsor. It meant gathering data and the pursuit of absolutes. Statistical mathematics were requisite courses and was meant to be used. Quantitative research could be replicated as it was controlled and quantified. It was neutral, lending itself to the idea that I could publish my discoveries and, with ease you

could behold the same outcome. Quantitative research could be proven statistically (Orme, 2006). You can remove variables than can distract from the purpose of your research. It sounds awfully clean, tidy, and controlled. The path of least resistance. What if one of the variables you want to examine is the researcher? This led me to autoethnography and what would become a path of the greatest resistance.

Autoethnography

Looking back to the beginning of my classes at Mount St. Vincent University it became clearer to me that exploring qualitative research was entering uncharted territory, adding the mess as it were. If my undergraduate views of research were represented by the promise of the absolute of quantitative research, qualitative research spoke to me of the human aspect of research, the mess of being an educator. Punch (1994, p. 83) has given a perspective that calls for the telling of stories of personal involvement locating ourselves as to who we are and when we are and to get out there and “just do it.” This all seemed risky but still the best conduit to express the socially constructed world of teaching and the ideal. It was like coming home in an academic sense. It spoke of the postmodern and teaching. “Although the credibility and usefulness of qualitative research remain a challenge in some settings, many funding organizations and reviewers are increasingly appreciative of the potential value of qualitative research” (Carey & Swanson, 2003). So, next begs the question: Why autoethnography? The answer rests in the idea of reflection in action:

When a practitioner becomes a researcher into his own practice, he engages in a continuing process of self-education . . . when she functions as a researcher-in-practice, the practice itself is a source of renewal. The recognition of error, with this resulting uncertainty, can become a source of discovery rather than an occasion for self-defence. (Schön, 1983, p. 299)

To understand what I do, I first need to consider the words of Dr. Blye Frank: “location, location, location.” There is a human element afoot and one facet of the human element is me.

Dorothy Smith (2006) stated that ethnography has

. . . to do with recognizing that you are always there, that what you discover is always seen, interpreted, heard, experienced by you as you are situated historically in the ongoing, never stand-still of the social. It is the recognition that the social as your research phenomenon is to be found in that ongoing process of which you are a part. (p. 2)

By extending this assertion to the self as part of the social construction, it became vital to tell my story through the process of autoethnography to understand the myth of the ideal.

In the field of social science ethnography is described as qualitative research that describes human social phenomena. Autoethnography differs from ethnography: the lens is turned inwards and the researcher becomes the primary subject of the research. By the means of personal writing and journals autoethnography becomes people understanding what to do, how to live, and what matters about our struggles. (Bochner & Ellis, 2006.)

To understand what I do as an educator I need to more completely understand through the process of autoethnography my own narrative and its link to my practice as an educator.

Knowing my personal narrative became an important part of making my thesis reflexive. This is not a confessional but rather a conscious choice to examine my identity. What I believe that autoethnography will afford me is the opportunity to explore with a critical eye what I do and why I do it. Autoethnography would afford the opportunity for me to unpack my identity as parent, teacher, and researcher. Using this lens to view the ideal will take this to a reflexive level. Frank Smith (1983) contends that there are two kinds of mistakes those that make a difference and those that don't. I need mine to make a difference.

Data

Three sources of data were used in this thesis: (a) journals as mother and teacher; (b) electronic recordings of my teaching practice; and (c) communications shared between school and home both in print form and via internet based websites.

Journalling as mother and teacher. I began journalling during school hours. What I wrote was about what I saw, felt, and experienced. It opened a connection between then and now, parenting and teaching. Sometimes it started with a conversation, words I heard in the halls of my school. “Did you see what they brought for lunch; does anyone care about this child?” “She is from a divorced home.” “It’s an apple tree situation—have you met the father?” Paraphrased in these words were common ideas I heard around the school in conversations, both with members of my profession as well as parents. The purpose of their words seemed simple: to categorize and explain why a child engaged in certain actions. Were these the agents of the ideal, I wondered. I began to question what we ask of families, children and teachers and why. I began to connect my experience as a teacher and parent in a very personal way.

I began to think back on my own story as a teacher and parent. “Critical incidents are those occurrences that let us see with new eyes some aspect of what we do. (Newman, 1992). When I began to entertain the idea of ethnography I decided to journal the memories that connected me to my classroom linking the thoughts and ideas of parenting and aspects of teaching. The idea came to me that to understand why I do what I do I had to unpack my identity.

I wrote freely and without judgment. I did not assign value or question the context of what I wrote. It was here where I first saw an emerging pattern. My reflections as a

parent were linked to what I do as a teacher. The parent located the teacher. The things that I found most frustrating as a teacher were the actions I clung to ardently as a parent. Again, situating the self becomes a focus of interest.

School communications. I became fascinated by an aspect of education; what schools convey to guardians. Language is our business; it is at the essence of pedagogy and curriculum. We speak to them at the doors of our schools saying hello and good bye conveying the day to day information and news from our schools and classroom. We send notes and newsletters. We post websites with everything from when pizza day is to tips on educating a child. I elected to focus my attention on communication shared with families. I open Chapter 2, “The Birth of the Ideal Family,” with a personal vignette that tells the story of becoming a parent and the impact of the realization that our son had developmental challenges. The data I used here was notes sent home by the Peel District School Board whose goal was to invite families to attend discussions regarding the recent issuing of the student report card. Here I began to explore the concept that there is an image of what an ideal family is.

From March 2010 until June 2010 I requested that six schools in the Peel District School Board (three primary junior schools and three intermediate schools) hold copies of correspondences sent home with their students. I asked for any communications that were sent home to be included but explained that my primary focus was in the area of assessment, communicating student achievement (i.e., report cards) and documents that presented the academic focus of the school. My hope was to not end up with a myriad of field trip permission forms. It was, however, exactly what I got. I wanted to see if examining these correspondences would lead to an understanding of the situated identity

of a school. (Gee, 2001). At first blush the messages sent from schools were mundane: Field trips, schedules and the day to day sameness of educational institutions. One note, however, formed a solid and affirmed connection to my ethnography. It was a district-wide note sent home with report cards. In it, what seemed to be highly evident was that the business of education when communicating achievement was that of informing students and families of the mistakes they made (Newman, 1990). How does the communication provided by educational institutions position students, within the image of the ideal?

If we indeed live in an information age what do we electronically convey to our families and guardians? I would turn to electronic communications and my own school board website as well as my own for these answers. What would websites, both from the school board and my own website communicate? How do these electronic media elements situate my practice, our students, and families? How does my school board position families? What does my website convey about how I position families?

Digital audio recordings of my practice. There still seemed to be a piece of the puzzle missing. I turned to Judith Newman (1990), who said:

Every teaching act, every decision we make in the course of the day, every response in the classroom is based on a number of often contradictory assumptions. We function intuitively because there is rarely enough time to consider the implications of our actions at the moment we are responding. (p. 65)

I could carefully consider the choice of words written in a note or posted on a website. I could spell-check, edit, and, to some degree, sanitize the message when given enough time to compose, edit, and recompose what is being said. Would this truly examine why I do what I do on a day-to-day basis? Would this process dig deep enough into my practice? To locate myself I needed to listen to what I said in class. If words were

powerful what did I wield in my classroom? How did who I am, what I say, and what I do intersect? The solution to this seemed to lay in my roots in the media; digitally recording what I say in the classroom.

I did something that intimidated me greatly. I wore an MP3 recorder from September 14 until October 20, 2010 recording random times in my classroom and school. The question that next came to me was how to do this and not become a performer for the microphone? The answer was simple. I was teaching in a Grade 1/2 pod classroom. We had 43 students, two teachers and a collaborative teaching practice. I was busy; I quickly learned to ignore it. Somehow being busy it just seemed to be less relevant than what was happening around me. I recorded my interactions with students and the daily lessons in my class. For reasons of ethics I transcribed and used only words I spoke. When a student's name was used I called him "Sammy" to protect his identity.

Analysis: Linking the Word and the World

To speak a true word is to transform the world.
—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The questions that came next were layered. How do I deconstruct my research? How do I make it a critical? Would it transform my practice? How do I take reflective writing and transform it to reflexive action? There was also the question of the sheer breadth of data I had collected. Selecting what data came from the reading of Judith Newman. The answer to this rested in the idea of critical incident analysis. Judith Newman called these times when you are forced to step back and analyze your own beliefs. To make this a critical analysis, framing the process is vital. My desire was to create an arms-length picture of what I do, what I want to do and what influences me as an educator. This was misguided. I could not exclude me from what I do. Selecting what

to include by viewing my data through a series of questions became an important part of this process (Newman, 1990). If teaching is a journey then this process is a chance to unpack and question the contents of my luggage.

Discourse Analysis

Language connects people to their reality and allows them to make sense of their experiences and create mental images of reality, both internal and external. (Halliday, 1985). What picture of the ideal of the classroom, of teaching, learning, and families are created? What work is language doing? For my purposes I will adapt this process to include elements of discourse analysis (Gee, 2011). For elements of the social analysis as seen in how words position families I will rely on the work of Allan Luke (1991), especially in considering the cultural aspects of schooling. This is the means by which I have examined both the written and electronic information conveyed to parents and guardians.

1. Text analysis (word choice)
2. Processing pragmatics (context)
3. Social analysis

How This Thesis Is Organized: Sweeping Me Out From Under the Rug

One of the greatest challenges of this thesis has been blending my own personal narratives with research. Would my narrative have meaning to the reader? Does my personal story matter? Each chapter is presented in three parts, first a personal journal entry or vignette from my experience as a teacher and parent. The second an analysis of documents both print and electronic shared by schools and digital audio recording of my own teaching practice where I explore the myth of the ideal parent, child and school. The

third is a reflection on the analysis segmented by three processes. It is where I continue to unpack the myth of the ideal.

What follows next is a chapter-by-chapter summary of my thesis.

In Chapter 2, “The Birth of the Ideal Family,” I open with a personal vignette that tells the story of becoming a parent. I used notes sent home by the Peel District School Board whose goal was to invite families to attend discussions regarding the recent issuing of the student report card. Here I began to explore the concept that there is an image of what an ideal family is and how language creates and reinforces this image.

Chapter 3, “My Sons are Perfect: Hearing My Voice as Mom,” begins with vignettes of parenting and navigating the experience of having a child who does not resemble the established ideal of a child entering school. I also examine the Peel District School Board website as well as my own website and their expectations of the ideal parent and family.

In “The In-School Review Committee and Transmission of the Ideal” (in Chapter 4), my vignette tells the story of going to an in-school placement committee meeting for my son as a parent. To unpack this experience as a teacher I wore the MP3 player an in-school placement and review committee to listen to what words I used to describe a child with very particular learning needs. Through analysis I explored how the ideal student created and expected from the school and school board connect and collide with my own created idea.

For Chapter 5, “Studenting the Reluctant Learner: Fashioning My Ideal,” the vignette introduces my second-born, a reluctant student who struggled with reconciling a

love of learning and his feelings of school. Through an analysis of an MP3 recording of my teaching time I to begin to look at my role in the construction of my ideal student.

This leads to Chapter 6, the conclusion of my thesis. The concluding chapter ties together the aspects of the ideal explored in the previous writings. This chapter also looks at the language I used in writing my own story in the vignettes. It also looks to the question, has the process of examining what I do with a critical lens changed what I do?

The epilogue gives insight as to what my next step has been since the process of writing this thesis has been undertaken. My learning does not end.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF THE IDEAL FAMILY

Vignette

We were living in Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories, Canada when my spouse and I brought home our first son. I was 20 years old. We wanted children. We were told we would likely never have offspring. We tried to conceive anyway and the next thing we knew we were pregnant and expecting our first child. In fact, we would have two sons in less than two years. People would casually ask me if I “had to” get married. I had what I thought was a good answer. Yes, we did have to get married; we were in love. In retrospect, this question situated me. I was a young mother, an inexperienced mother, and perhaps an accidental mother; questions were asked that were intended to tell my story, my family’s story, and at the same time locate me as a mother, as a parent and as a woman.

We fell in love with our new boy. Like the mantra of so many before us, we said we didn’t care what the gender was, we prayed for a healthy child. He came into world at 9 pounds 8.5 ounces with red hair and vigour. We quickly became aware that there was no “operator’s manual” or “Parenting for Dummies” for the new parent. We were much like any new family—looking at each new experience with our son as if no child had ever done what he was doing before. We took out a newspaper announcement proclaiming we had added “The Future Prime Minister of Canada” to our family. As is the case with most new parents we celebrated each new milestone—the first tooth, sitting up, the first words. We wanted to make the most of each decision we would make on Patrick’s behalf. We became keenly aware of what the word challenge meant around the time of his first birthday when he began to lose the verbal skills he had developed. He went from words like “tickle” and “bye-bye” to speaking something akin to a 33 record being played on a turntable at 45. No words, just sounds at high speed. It was unusual but made him more endearing to us. Although he seemed to love the time and attention Patrick began to prefer solitary play retreating from social situations. We tried to honour Patrick as a person, who he was, we allowed him to play in the kitchen cabinets that he had set up with his toys. He easily went in and shut the door behind him, at the time not really seeing the symbolism of his act. When he communicated only through echolalia at the age of three we were fully enmeshed in the idea that Patrick was a person who would need our full attention, especially in light of the fact that he was about to enter school. We were terrified. What would an outsider think of our beautiful son? We sought specialized developmental attention. His first diagnosis was grim and, we would later learn, incorrect. The social worker who evaluated Patrick said he had “dysphasia.” We had no idea what this meant. She explained that it was a lack of capacity to learn language and went on to predict that our son would likely become violent in later years. We could not see this as a possibility; he was our perfect boy. She recommended we isolate him from his younger brother Ryan, since she felt Patrick would become aggressive as he grew older. Patrick was not aggressive in fact his younger brother frequently had to be reminded to be gentle with his big brother. She said we should consider looking at institutions. We had gone from planning to enroll him in kindergarten

to being asked to consider losing him. I was told this over the phone in one conversation. Would this message have been delivered in this manner if I had been perceived as having power? Did this news and its delivery situate me as a parent? I have come to understand it has situated me as an educator and as a parent.

I shared the phone call with my spouse; we wept. We were young and inexperienced parents. I lacked the ability to question those I perceived to be in power. The only response I had was emotional; none of this seemed possible. We did nothing but talk about what we should do. We did not agree with this diagnosis and prognosis but had no idea of what to do. We never spoke to the woman who delivered this message again. We were about to enroll Patrick in Junior Kindergarten. We knew we had some very important decisions to make. Should he attend school? We sat in our home considering her words and options for our son when our front door opened. A boy who, by his height, we surmised was about 10 or 12 ran past us into our kitchen and began to rifle through the drawers of our kitchen cabinets. He was wearing a large t-shirt and a diaper, shoes and socks. I walked towards him and he yelled, no words, just guttural sounds. He held his hands up. I asked Neil to go into the street and see if someone was looking for him. Shortly Neil came back with a very tired looking woman. She explained that her boy was diagnosed with autism, a word with which Neil and I were not very familiar. The woman's parents had previously owned our house and had kept playing cards for him in the kitchen drawers. He liked to touch and play with cards. She thanked us and gently guided her boy out the front door.

What we have since come to see as this fortuitous event that guided our next choice for Patrick. He did not speak in sentences, but he did speak. He showed and accepted physical affection. He played with his brother. He was beginning to read some words in familiar books. He did not wear a diaper. With great fear and trepidations we ignored the words of the social worker. We enrolled Patrick into Junior Kindergarten, explaining to the school that we were seeking a competent diagnostic evaluation of our son's needs. We did not ever share with any public education institution this early diagnosis. It was not until Patrick was almost seven that we would have a medically interpreted picture of who our son is. Patrick's diagnostic identity includes very mild Asperger's syndrome as well as a form of dyslexia. Ironically the doctor who helped form this medical picture of our son also had Asperger's syndrome. We elected never to share his diagnosis fully with his school omitting the diagnostic label of Asperger's. From our own experiences, the label of a pervasive developmental disorder would change the direction of his learning; a learning disability label would direct his learning. I had no idea that this would become important to me one day as a professional. With the birth of my son our ideal family was born.

The Ideal Student: Language and the Ideal

In this chapter I explore the image of the ideal student and how the language of one school board-wide communication positioned students based on their academic performance. My analysis will unpack the language used in a printed note sent home to

families, how it supports an ideal image of student's success and as a result of this, repositions the relationship between teachers and the families of the students they teach.

Parents don't wish for children with special needs. It is not commonplace to utter, "I hope our son has a diagnostic label of autism" or "would it not be a blessing if she had Down Syndrome." Parents hope for and expect that their children will indeed be perfect and they themselves will be ideal parents. Within that world, parents picture themselves in a myriad of surroundings engaging in all the wonderful fun and challenges.

According to Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano, and Daly (1995), "The 'ideal' middle-class mother has often been described as one who is engaged in inquiry-like verbalizations, rarely making negative, corrective, or punitive statements, compared to the poor lower status mother who is seen as controlling, directive, and intrusive" (p. 802). By definition, my spouse and I fit the ideal. We were seen as community leaders and intimately connected with where we lived. How would our child, who had special learning needs fit into this socially constructed ideal? When I was a child, the ideal child was said to be seen and not heard. Now, childhood itself is seen as a social construction with children as active participants in the building of its definition (James & Prout, 1997). "The ideal pupil is seen by teachers as a creative self-actualising pupil who has freedom to negotiate independently of authority" (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2009, p. 437).

In the spring of 2009 this became an issue I would again explore. The myth of the ideal would become an important question once again.

I was at school, checking my staff mailbox as I do every day when I lost my temper after finding a note in my mailbox that I was to send home with term report cards. Each year we send home notes to ask parents what would be a good time to discuss their child's progress. This year they were quite different. For the first time since I have been a teacher they were printed in two colours and offered two distinct messages. The pink note (Figure 2) was to be sent home with children who had met the provincial standard on their report card. The green note (Figure 3) was for the families of students who had not met this criterion. It caused me to question how I do what I do and what it means for my students. I have long thought that school can be a club where those who know the rules play the game successfully. Knowing what parenting a school aged child and what schools expect can be a daunting learning curve. What happens when the rules do not apply to the individual student? What happens when the child/parent/teacher relationship has added dynamics? Learning this elegant dance presents new layers to these relationships.

In the 2010 school year, due to an alteration in our teaching contract, there was a significant change made to the structure and function of the reporting period. Teachers in my region gained a professional development day with no teaching responsibilities in the first teaching term to compose report cards and evaluate student work. The norm at our school was to meet with all guardians and children after they had received the first term report card. It was intended to be a chance to celebrate learning and discuss strategies that would likely be of benefit for our students. Now, as we had acquired a day to write report cards we had lost a day that had been previously designated to meet with families.

I spoke to my vice-principal. “Do we have to send this note home? Is it mandated?” I said this in reference to the green note. She explained that these were the notes that our teachers’ federation (union) and school board had agreed upon. The phrase agreed upon sound much friendlier than mandated but no less damning to the receiver. The vice-principal said I should probably call the federation directly. I felt like I was engaged in a game of political ping pong with my students being used as the ball. I sent an email to my teachers’ federation liaise. He would not respond by email. When I spoke with him directly he said that the notes were as close as all parties, school board and teachers’ federation, could get to an agreement. This did not quell my ire.

Unpacking the Notes

Why did the message of these notes matter? “Learning often remains tacit unless we teachers have an opportunity to make it explicit” (Newman, 1997, p. 247). I needed to unpack the language of the notes, their function, and impact. Perhaps understanding the impact of the notes to my identities as person, teacher and parent are part of why the notes were distressing. Is my identity as a special needs parent related to my identity as a teacher? What note would I have received? I have two very different sons, was there a blue note forthcoming to accommodate families with more than one child? “One of your children may or may not be meeting provincial standard.” Was this what would have fit my family? What values would this have communicated to me as Patrick’s mother? Do these notes speak to the ideal student as one who meets provincial standard?

“We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies and distinctive ways of thinking” (Gee,

2005, p.10). The school board–wide notes asserted that the capital that is valued is a child’s capacity to “meet Provincial Standard.” “Exclusion from any club of learners is a condition difficult to reverse, whether we impose it upon ourselves or have it imposed on us” (Frank Smith, 1988.) According to Ontario Education Ministry definitions my son would never meet provincial expectations, due to his identification as an exceptional learner. Neither do English language learners because teachers alter their learning expectations. The Provincial Standard is somewhat less standard to those who are deemed as exceptional. What does this communicate about what we value as educators? Do we advantage learners who are not identified as exceptional over those who are identified? My objections did not spring from my thoughts as an educator but from my thoughts as Patrick’s mother.

“The speaker is by no means just communicating information. She is also doing all sorts of work, work that attempts to create, transform and negotiate social relationship” (Gee, 2011, p. 14). The work of the note indicating that the child had not met provincial standard on the surface seems to speak to the necessity or lack thereof, to meet to discuss a student’s academic development. Those meeting provincial standard, students who are graded B or higher are not necessarily in need of parent/school communication. Below grade level B students are a different matter.

In September 2010 the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) released a new policy document, “Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario’s Schools, First Edition Covering Grades 1 to 12.” It says:

The primary purpose of assessment and evaluation for students with special education needs, as for all students, is to improve student learning.” For a student with special education needs who requires modified or alternative expectations, assessment and evaluation of his or her achievement will be based on the

modified curriculum expectations or alternative expectations outlined in the student's individual education plan (IEP). (p. 71)

The ideologies that speak to the learning of children who are ELL learners bear some similarities:

It is essential for all educators to understand the distinction between modifications and accommodations as well as the importance of providing either or both, as needed, to English language learners. These measures contribute to fairness and social justice for many students in an increasingly multicultural environment. (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 77)

The aim is detailed textual analyses that denaturalise ideologies in texts, showing how they are related to relations of power that systematically advantage some groups over others. (Janks, 1997, p. 330)

Do we systematically advantage those who can meet the provincial expectation?

This brings me full circle to my reaction as a teacher/parent. My son, by formal educational definition, could not meet provincial standards. In a school whose population consists largely of ELL students, it seemed inequitable to compare non-English speakers with those who are fluent in English as they will not meet standard either.

In unpacking the note I had to examine the language. The pink note for the families of students who are meeting provincial uses the phrases "your child:" and states that the parent "would like to speak with" the teacher placing the onus of responsibility on the parent to initiate contact. The green note for parents/guardians of children "who have not demonstrated the required knowledge and skills in meeting provincial expectations" asks that "we" discuss your child's progress. In the Teacher Requested Contact portion the "I" becomes "teacher" and "would like to speak" becomes "wish to speak with." The verbs are virtually identical throughout both notes with the exception of the subject, verb, and object order in the green note. "Your child" asserts that the ownership of the academic deficiency does not rest with the school. "Has not

demonstrated” and “required knowledge” are also powerful tools in emphasizing the lack of skill and knowledge is the dominion of the child. I did not send the green note, I did attach a personal note that did not begin with the pronoun “we” but ended with it instead. If I espouse to create a collaborative environment with parents and students, why did I send the note at all? I can’t in all good conscience offer the “busy teacher” excuse. I am part of this system that is in need of change.

How would Patrick’s mother have read this note? Simply put, the note would have terrified me. I already knew my son was learning, growing, and becoming at a standard that we were comfortable with. We compared his learning with one element alone; what Patrick knew today, what he came to understand, how he changed! We looked at his development as a lived experience. According to Vygotsky (2004), “Children grow into the intellectual life around them” (p. 88). Neil and I saw growth in our children.

The note brought me back to the impersonal phone call so long ago. The news that Patrick, by outsider’s standards, was not perfect came in an impersonal phone call; intimate news from a faceless voice. This time it was that much more insidious. The institutional/educational pronouncement came on coloured paper and required my signature. As a teaching professional I could disagree and proceed in a manner that I felt respected my student’s and their families. Could the parents who would receive the green note disagree? Would they know how? Paolo Freire (2000) spoke of the implications of educational practice on perceptions of the world: “All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator’s part. This stance in turn implies—sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly—an interpretation of man and the world” (p. 43).

At the beginning of this chapter I spoke of my ideal family. I explored the language of a note sent home to families and how it altered the relationship between parents, teachers, and schools. “Speech is as much an action as hitting someone with a stick, or hugging them” (Austin, 1962). Patrick’s mother would have viewed the note as an assault from a world that did not know her son. My child was ideal. If a note home could alter a relationship that should be collaborative what power could a school website wield? In Chapter 3 the Peel District School Board presents yet another version of the ideal presented in their website.

CHAPTER 3

MY SONS ARE PERFECT: HEARING MY VOICE AS MOM—UNPACKING

THE IMAGE OF THE IDEAL STUDENT AND FAMILY

Vignette

Being a mom can be a lonely job. The pay is not great but the fringe benefits are amazing! You get to be privy to the growing of a person. Parenting a child who does not represent the developmental progression that most children follow can be an isolating experience. You tend to feel you have been pushed off the judgment pedestal. You may have uttered this somewhere along the way: “When I have kids I am never going to” the end of the phrase varies but the result is the same. It is a promise to do what you perceive as the best you can for your offspring. We all expect to be experts when it comes to our own children. My sons were and are perfect . . . to me! I learned to accept that some people did not appreciate Ryan’s energy and did not understand Patrick’s silence and affinities. Who cares! Still, it stings when someone tells you that you may not want to pick “this” preschool, “my daughter goes there, I don’t think your son is ready for it yet.” Rescinded play dates and comments such as “are they always like this” were the norm for Neil and me. I remember being in a grocery store with Patrick and being passed by a mother and daughter. Pat explained that the young girl was in his class. When I got closer I overheard the mother saying, “If he’s weird, stay away from him.” Justifying my child was not a path I intended to follow. My first instinct was to correct her; I opted to talk to my boy instead. I was more concerned about my son. I knew Patrick heard her. I swallowed hard and asked him what he was thinking. He answered me simply. “She’s wrong.” Good for you, Patrick!

I am thankful I was a parent before I was a teacher. I think this added perspective has given me a lens I would not have been privileged to have had if the reverse were true. I have sat across the table in a parent interview and I know how both sides of the table feel. I know how powerless a parent can feel when you are talking about their perfect little ones. My son is perfect and he has Asperger’s. You can be both.

My first encounter with a teacher meeting ended in the principal’s office. We had moved as often happens in a job in the media which had us transferring Patrick’s school. His first teacher had been quite tender and gentle and we felt as though Patrick was part of a school community. They even invited Ryan to their Halloween celebration even though he was not yet in school. When I toured his new class this sense of belonging was absent. I explained to his new teacher that we knew that Patrick was bright and knowledgeable and spoke of himself in the first person. These things could all exist concurrently. “Patrick is a good job” was one of his frequent phrases. Although not grammatically correct, we agreed with him. He was a good job. When we toured her classroom she developed her own sense of echolalia as well when she repeated numerous times “I have a really good class this year, I hope he doesn’t change this.” The word “changed” was replaced by “ruin” on a couple of occasions. When the tour was done I went to the principal and asked if this class was a good choice for my son. He assured me that she was a seasoned teacher and her years of experience would be great for Pat. He

also said he felt I may have misunderstood. I asked if there was another way to interpret what she had said. We sent Pat to school and kept a watchful eye an act we would repeat many times through his schooling. Oddly enough she had more challenge when Ryan was her student the next year. His energy was palpable. She retired the next year. I have wondered if he wore her out!

I don't think I ever felt I was truly part of the process of my son's learning in the classroom. I was just a well-meaning spectator with a couple of good ideas to share and the keen sense to keep out of the way. When my children were young students I did not speak the language of school. It did occur to me when looking back through their school records that either of our son's was welcomed or not by various parts of the school systems. Different times, different son's, unwelcome nonetheless. Finding a voice would take much time. Does my powerlessness as a parent speak to what I perceived as the ideal image of parent and child and what is expected by schools?

In enrolling my son in school I became keenly aware of what would be expected of him as a student, and of me as a parent. In this chapter I will unpack the image of the ideal student and family represented in the Peel School Board's website. I will deconstruct the language used on the website to show how school boards use language to construct an image of the ideal parent and student. This chapter sets forth conflicting views. The school board presents the ideal student as one whom, with a parent who is connected to the learning of their child, sets goals, reads, and values the learning that occurs at school. Through reviewing literature and research on parent involvement and perceptions of schooling I have found that connecting to families and children involves a relationship where both parties are aware of each other's needs. The school board constructed an internet website with the goal of digitally connecting with families. What has become more apparent in this chapter of my thesis is that as a school board we do not connect meaningfully with parents. We do not address the values of students and their parents. We cannot address what we don't understand.

Dot.com Disconnect: Deconstructing a School Board Website Ideal

In September 2010, the National School Public Relations Association recognized the Peel District School Board as leaders in internet communications with families. The day-to-day elements of learning such as school closures and the ability to receive timely updates were lauded by Tony Pontes, direction of education:

Everything we do is designed to help students learn to the best of their ability. If we want to achieve this goal, we need to focus our resources and work together. Our elementary websites and the other projects recognized this year are great examples of the extraordinary work happening in our schools and workplaces to support student success. (Peel District School Board, 2011)

The link "Parents Boost Learning" gives many ideas of what families need to do to have "confident" children. It does not ask what parents value, it explains what parents need to

do. The element that is lacking is the concept “working together.” Gee (2004) spoke of affinity spaces, physical and virtual places that are constructed not by shared race or, gender or class but by shared interest:

In an affinity space knowledge is often both intensive (each person entering the space shares some special knowledge) and extensive (each person entering the space shares some knowledge and function with others)...new members acquire such tacit knowledge by guided participation in the practices of the space. (p. 98)

Communications assumes shared cultural context and knowledge. (Gee, 2011, p. 6.) It assumes that being in school is a place of safety and community for all:

For many parents, school brings back memories of their own failure. Some feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, and even guilty when they walk into a school. Others do not feel valued by the schools. Feelings of inadequacy, shyness or resentment, longing or fear...every parent has his or her own story to tell. (Vandergrift and Green, 1992, p. 57)

Lareau (1989) asserted:

Although parent involvement is positively linked to school success, many parents are not as involved as teachers would like. This lack of involvement is not random: social class has a very powerful influence on parent involvement pattern. (p. 3)

The website sets forth the assumption that what is valued in school is also valued by families. This includes nightly reading and consistent attendance. Gee (2005) stated:

Any situation involves social goods and views on their distribution as a component. What social goods (e.g., status, power aspects of gender race, and class or more narrowly defined social networks and identities) are relevant (and irrelevant) in this situations? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways? (p. 112)

What becomes visible and relevant is that the ideal family must value what schools value. Information regarding what is to be valued flows in one direction, from the gatekeepers to the school board to the family.

Lifelong Learning: The Parent and School Relationship

The screenshot shows the Peel District School Board website. The main heading is "Parents Boost Learning". Below it, a quote reads: "Lifelong learning: striving to be the best." That is our vision and our mission. We want every student to have a successful school experience. When schools and parents work together our students are the winners! Here are some ways you can help build your child's confidence. This quote is attributed to Tony Pontes, Director of Education. Below the quote, there is a section for "Parenting and Family Literacy Centres" which describes a play-based program and lists several locations: Sir Wilfrid Laurier Public School, Brampton; Ellengate Public School, Mississauga; Hewson Public School, Brampton; and Morton Way Public School, Brampton. A "subscribe" button is also visible on the left side of the page.

Figure 4. Peel District School Board web page.

“Lifelong learning: striving to be the best.” That is our vision and our mission. We want every student to have a successful school experience. When schools and parents work together our students are the winners! Here are some ways you can help build your child’s confidence.

—Tony Pontes, Director of Education, Peel District School Board

These words are found on the website (Peel District School Board, n.d.) under the heading “Parents Boost Learning” (Figure 4). The text proposes a shared vision and mutual understanding between families and schools as demonstrated by statements like “When schools and parents work together our students are the winners!” Upon further reading of the text a shift begins to unfold presenting an image that disrupts the

partnership between parents and schools as demonstrated in phrases such as “your child’s confidence” or “there are steps “you” must follow.” The use of the pronouns “you” and “your” present an image of shifting power. Gee (2005) spoke to how speakers and writers use grammatical devices to shape their texts “as if they (the speaker and writers and the texts) had certain “goals” and “purposes.” As listeners and receivers we “recover” these goals and purposes by paying attention to the uses to which these grammatical devices are put. Goals and purposes, in this sense, are not privately in people’s heads, but publicly available in texts. Of course, they are always open to contestation and negotiation.” When the pronoun choice is from “you” rather than “us” the relationship is disconnected, the relationship of parent and school is separate. “This negotiation is always shaped by the very grammatical devices that opened the negotiation in the first place” (Gee, 2001, p. 193).

Parents Boost Learning: Unpacking the Peel Board Website

The Peel School Board web page offers a large variety of information for parents (see Figures 5 and 6). “The success of any one parent involvement strategy depends on how well it matches up with an individual parent’s needs. The secret is to know who your parents are and to have in a schools repertoire as many options for involvement as possible” (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992, p. 59). The question is does the website speak to or at families.

Be generous with praise

Observe your child carefully and comment on the things that are done well. When you see an area that needs improvement, find a positive way to talk about it with your child.

Encourage “personal best”

Help your child by encouraging him or her to do the best in school and at home. Remember, "personal best" does not mean "perfect," and learning is not the same as high grades. Children, like adults, need the freedom to make mistakes and to learn from them.

Make learning a priority

Your attitude toward school attendance, education, and involvement in the school makes a strong and lasting impression on your child. Show your child, by example, that learning is a priority.

Figure 5. Peel District School Board website advice to parents (1).

“No approach to literacy is neutral”(Luke, 1991, p.135).The bolded titles “Be Generous with Praise,” “Encourage Personal Best,” and “Make Learning a Priority” (Figure 4) says that what happens at school can be part and parcel to what occurs at home. The verbs are definitive and absolute. The issue of attendance (Figure 3) does not allow for the needs of families. Learning happens at school. The ideal does not speak to learning from interaction between home and school but instead of leaning as a process of fitting a prescribe ideal. Allan Luke (1997) wrote:

Much sociological research indicates that education systems produce inequality by disbursing competence and knowledge unequally to children of different social groups. There is ample evidence that literacy teaching and learning in schools play a key role in this cycle. Children enter school with various kinds and levels of oral and literate knowledges and competences. (p. 17)

To this I would add that the social competencies of being a student and the competencies of being a parent of a school-aged child vary across families. Knowledge of how to do both produce very different learning experiences for both children and parents.

Show interest in school work

Talk about school each day.
 Ask to see class work.
 Have your child read aloud to you.
 Read to and with your child from a variety of material in your first language.
 Encourage your child to discuss new ideas and opinions.

Offer suggestions for success

Help your child use the following strategies to improve performance in school:
 Read the assignment when it is given.
 Keep a list of new vocabulary.
 Proof read assignments to catch errors before writing a final draft.
 Review notes before a test.

Schedule study time

Set up an area for homework away from noise and distractions. Post a family calendar that schedules school project deadlines, after-school activities, mid-term dates, exam periods, and report card dates.

Figure 6. Peel District School Board advice to parents (2).

As sociologists have argued, schools have a way of expecting of children what schools are charged with providing, of valorising and rewarding those children who bring to classrooms the most ‘school-like’ competences and task-orientations . . . But unless we are able to reconstruct and shape our classroom literacy materials and events to fit what she knows and can do, we may set out the conditions for her to fail even before she begins. (Luke, 1997)

Allan Luke described literacy as a social practice. “The best intentions can be part and parcel of the playing out of a social and economic agenda.” “All parties purport to speak on behalf of children’s needs and the “equality of educational opportunity,” “empowerment” and so forth” (Luke, 1991, p. 135). What seems to be the focus of the

previous entry from the school board website is what home can do to support school/boards ideals. It asks families to “talk about school,” “see classwork,” “read assignments” and “keep vocabulary lists” (Figure 6). It is as though families are doing much to keep the voice of school at full volume. Cummins (1989) wrote: “The process of top down control is, almost by definition, disempowering for those being controlled” (p. 26). Although the process Cummins was speaking of was educational reform it holds equally well when used as a lens to view what educational institutions request of families. We expect families to mould what they do to fit school. The ideal is defined as do as we do; we hold the keys to literacy. Again, the flow of information is from school and board to family.

Do we ask to do as we do, and do we value what families value? The Peel District School Board (2010) website asks parents to “Read to and with your child from a variety of material in your first language” (Figure 6). This is the only reference to any literacy practice that is not in English. This is the only reference of any practice that is generated from the family, not directed by the school. “Literacy is not just a set of decontextualized skills, but is a demonstrably significant cultural practice. This is something, something that is valued by the community and culture, something vital for its participants” (Luke, 1991, p. 139). We ask families to value what we do: “see classwork,” “read assignments,” “keep a list of new vocabulary,” “proofread.” The implicit assumption underlying the recommendations on the website is that the families are very organized and involved in the learning of their children. It makes one wonder, how do families that work non-traditional schedules (as mine did) participate in their children’s learning? Does this website open the door to receive what families’ value? Turning the lens

towards my own experience as a parent, I asked myself if the values of my family would blend with the ideas of the school board. Figure 7 offers further advice.

Support 100 percent attendance

Some kinds of absences are unavoidable, but taking students out of school unnecessarily is disruptive for learning.

Help set goals

At the beginning of each term, help your child identify three or four goals. Put the goals where they can be frequently seen. (The refrigerator is always an excellent spot.) Make sure the goals are specific.

Get involved

Attend school activities such as open houses, parent/teacher interviews, and School Council meetings. When your children see you involved, they will also see education as a high priority. Interpreters are available for parent interviews.

Make direct contact with the school

Try to make early and positive contact with your child's teacher. We encourage you to visit the school or phone your child's teacher with any questions or concerns. The Peel District School Board recognizes that email is a valuable communication tool that is widely used across our society. As such, staff and students are encouraged to use email to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communication both within the organization and with the broader community.

Figure 7. Peel District School Board advice to parents (3).

The Peel District School Board directs with advice of what families should do to produce successful students. Learning happens at school and is goal oriented. “The dominant discourse of parent involvement in education, which assumes that parents are primarily responsible for children’s literacy and educational achievement, that they enact this responsibility in specific ways, and that education in the home and school should be closely aligned” (Prins &Toso, 2008, p.556.) Ironically the school board suggests that

parents should maintain email communications with teachers however teachers at Peel district school board are discouraged from email contact with parents for reasons of personal liability.

In this chapter I have examined how ideal parent and student are represented by the Peel District School Board's website. The concept of the ideal says that this student attends school, has goals, and has a family that will help set goals for learning. Parents are told to be involved in their children's schools. The ideal student and family appear to be the one who conforms to the mainstream model of education. The families of the Peel School Board do not match the ideal offered in the website. They could not. In the next chapter I will discuss how students who are deemed exceptional cannot conform to the image of the ideal.

CHAPTER 4

THE IN-SCHOOL REVIEW COMMITTEE AND ANOTHER IDEAL

Vignette

My spouse and I were the first teachers of two boys we knew as exceptional humans but, as I have come to appreciate, the word exceptional can have many meanings. We attended all invitations that we possibly could to be a part of the learning our children were part of - Plays, pageants, speeches, and, parent teacher meeting. We told them to say their lines in the Christmas pageant loudly, they spoke their words so loudly that it startled the audience - We quietly giggled. We had proof that they listened to us! We went to soccer and affectionately referred to it as weeding and swarming as some of the little boys including our own sat down centre field to pick dandelions while the rest flocked towards the ball as a collective. We went to Beavers, Cubs, Cadets, and all the typical activities where little boys went to play. Life included trips to the library, shopping, camping, and friends. For Ryan, our youngest, there was a successive group of friends settling into a precious few best friends. He would regularly walk into our kitchen and introduce his new "best friend" and then ask the child "What is your name?" He was gregarious and larger than life. Patrick walked the periphery a bit more than his younger brother. He would latch onto one friend and stick with him like glue. He preferred the quiet company of a one to one relationship. Both boys were closely bonded to each other, like words and music they were seldom separate. Our family was perfect; our sons were and are perfect.

By the time the boys were well into primary school years I worked part time in the media writing and for the Association for Community Living at a group home and respite program for developmentally challenged children and adults. When I had worked full time in radio day care and babysitters had proved to be inconsistent and unreliable. We tried to gear our work around the idea that we wanted to be the primary caregivers of our sons. It meant a variety of shifts and a lot of juggling. My spouse's work as a morning radio announcer afforded him ample hands-on time with the boys

If glee was the emotion of celebrations like performances and plays then hesitancy was the dominant force governing parent- teacher meetings. Here it seems we would talk about what to do to make our children better. With each report card and scheduled school offering of contact Neil and I made every effort to attend as a tandem. Both boys had similar comments made of them. Both were not fond of nor did they prove particularly capable when it came to fine motor tasks. We owned many unbroken crayons! Patrick was recommended for occupational therapy to correct this doing weekly exercises designed to strengthen this weakness. Ryan was not referred for assistance. They both love physical learning and play and seemed to exhibit attentional difficulties. Quite often it was suggested strongly that Ryan should be assessed for his attentional challenges and be assessed for giftedness. These ideas were carefully posed to Neil and me as suggestions given word of mouth, never in written reports. We opted to stay the course with Ryan and let him be the boy he was. They both loved oral reading and were not particularly organized in their work habits. They were both seen as enthusiastic, Ryan was seen as very emotional. His first report card said he may be the world youngest

philosopher. It occurred to me looking at their reports and thinking back to their interviews that often times we felt like we had four boys, the two we sent to school and the two we had at home.

Patrick's identification was shared with us at an identification, placement, and review committee (IPRC). He was labelled "a pupil in the Communication Learning Disabled area." Our first annual review meeting was attended by my husband and me. Interestingly, in subsequent years when Neil was the only parent that could attend due to work conflicts the school would offer to wait until I could also attend. When I attended alone the school accepted this and did not offer to reschedule. We have spent many hours discussing the message that this sent. What knowledge did I possess as his mother that Neil did not? Was Neil regarded differently than I was? I had preconceived notions of what special education would mean. When I was a child "those kids" were in the basement of my school in segregated classrooms. When I was in Grade 1 it was suggested that I might have a "reading problem." Wearing corrective lenses changed the directions of my learning and opened a world of words for me. I remember coming to school with my new glasses and thinking that there were so many things in the room I had never noticed before. Patrick would not have a new pair of specs that would redirect his learning path. He had documents, identification, teachers, and parents who wanted to understand as much as we could. We did not share the idea that Asperger's might be part of the picture as well. Neil and I were very direct in the committee meeting. We did not want special classroom placement. We did not want Patrick to be taken out of the mainstream class. We did ask for Patrick to attend the annual meeting. I remember hearing my spouse Neil say to the committee "Why don't you ask him directly?" more than once when Patrick was referred to in the abstract. Neil redirected some questions to Pat's attention. I listened intently, a skill I have spent a lifetime honing. The one consistent comment we read on all his reports was Patrick never asked for help. While Asperger's Syndrome does not carry with it a cognitive deficit as part of the criteria it does speak to a person's capacity to relate interpersonally. I have often thought that knowing this would have taken phrases like "needs to remember to make eye contact" from his report cards and inexorably changed his life's direction. What would have giving into the allusions of Ryan's exceptionality have done? Is a learner with an exceptionality one who can fit the ideal?

The Image of the Ideal and the School

Language, then, is not merely *representational* (though is it that); it is also *constitutive*. It actually creates realities and invites identities.

—Johnston, 2004, p. 9

This chapter began with an anecdote that speaks of my experience with the in-school procedure called the IPRC. It speaks to how we viewed the process of identifying our son with special needs as impacting him in a meaningful way. In this chapter I will discuss the makeup and function of the in-school review committee (ISRC). I will

examine the language I use while presenting Sammy, a student in my Grade 1/2 class, to the committee. This examination will show how language reinforces my image of the ideal student, the school's image of the ideal student and where these images converge and collide

The ISRC Committee: How It Works

Parents are not invited to attend the ISRC meetings. I learned this fact when I became a teacher. As a parent I asked my son's schools for assistance to best understand the specific learning needs of my children. Understanding how my children learned in a classroom setting was important to my spouse and me. As a teacher it was explained to me that the parent's presence at ISRC would slow the process down as the committee meets for a very short time and can often discuss upwards of 14 students in any one sitting. Parent approval is required at each step of the process. The goal to fashion "a predictable flow of well-behaved children chock full of facts and sporting ever-higher test scores" (Cuban, 1984). From an outsider's perspective, this assembly-line process seems less than student focused

The purpose of this committee is to decide if the student presented can be deemed exceptional and thus warranting special educational considerations such as modifications to the curriculum. The goal of all those in attendance is to review the student's progress via assessment data and either recommend further assessment or refer Sammy to the IPRC as the child has been deemed exceptional.

The ISRC committee comprises the school's principal and vice-principal. It also includes the in-school support teachers, whose work is one-to-one and small group classes with children who are identified with special learning needs; and the in-school

social worker and speech language pathologist. The Peel District School Board is generally represented by a psychoeducational consultant and special education resource teacher. Each time I have attended this committee there has always been at least one person from the school's administration and one person from the school board. The normal response from the committee for my presentations has been to explain that there is a long list for psychoeducational testing so I should not expect this occurrence any time soon. I am also asked if I have ruled out hearing and vision deficits.

What I am typically asked for is the standardized assessment I have used so far. In primary grades I am usually asked for Dolch word testing. The list was prepared in the 1930's to indicate frequently used words that cannot be readily sounded out. The ideal student, according to Dolch philosophy, would have a mastery of these words to assist with fluency. This would be achieved by the end of Grade 1 (Dolch, 1948). It is something that will be assessed and reassessed by in-school support teachers whose job is to give one to one teaching time with students who are struggling. In the case of most struggling Grade 1 or 2 students the Dolch list represents a list of what they don't know rather than what they do. This part of the process is tough for me to share, since I don't do a lot of standardized testing (with the exception of sound letter recognition). I feel that you can see more about a learner in a regular task through observations than you can through the strains of one to one testing. For the school system, the ideal student has the requisite knowledge for his grade and age.

During the ISRC the act of decoding written language usually seems to be what is at issue. This seems to be an area where ideals collide. The school as the voice of the school board values meeting the goals of standardized testing. I value observational data.

When presenting a student I always start with what they are proud of, how they relate to literacy, who they are as a literate person. I bring in journal entries where they have shown their understanding of books and ideas explored in class. I speak to how they question what they see and how they express their understanding. The committee will look at work samples but refer to the in-school support person for standardized assessments. Each time I present to the committee I get the sense that how I do what I do may be a bit frustrating. In thinking back I am always startled at how little we seem to outwardly value thinking. I wonder if this has to do with the perception that it is not a measurable quality of the learner. I wonder if the ideal student is seen as one who thinks and questions.

ISRC : The Ideal Work It Does

The problem with tests is that if we take enough of them finally a weakness is found. In most cases the data is redundant and the student who initially flunks a test or subtest is put in double jeopardy when given a second test.

—Jerome Harste, in Taylor, *Learning Denied* (p. 82)

In looking at the words I used in this meeting my goal was to see what I did to support the image of the ideal student when the learning profile of the student does not fit the ideal. To better understand what my role is in the classroom creating the identity of students in this environment I needed to hear the words I speak to the committee. I need to understand how I support and construct the image of the ideal with my words.

My goal in presenting Sammy is to alter one of the lenses he is seen through, namely, the Ontario Curriculum. Without the strains of grade by grade prescription he can be seen as developing and growing not measured by the curriculum but as seen compared to what the child accomplished previously. In this particular ISRC I said I wanted Sammy's success to "mean something." Sammy was progressing slowly. He was

more comfortable socially and more competent with reading and math. He had friends and expressed greater enjoyment at the prospect of being in school. All students' work is compared with what is typically expected by all children at their grade level.

Identification would allow what they do to be seen as distinct from their grade level. I would be permitted to look at Sammy's work not as a Grade 2 student but instead as a student who is learning.

As the speaker in the ISRC I was saying and doing many things. With words I endeavoured to paint a picture of a human being in my classroom. I tried to tell his story as I understood it, to blend the narrative of Sammy with the quantifiable information that would allow the legal process of showing his learning as successful. I explained what I saw, how he expresses his thoughts and feelings, and how he interacts with peers. I explained that Sammy was no longer a child who hides each day. Sammy was now a child who enters the classroom more willingly and will share his thinking. This is success: the child was developing as a learner. With the permission of the committee to identify the child as successful, this young learner would be defined as a student growing. What follow are a transcript of a presentation I made regarding Sammy to the ISRC committee.

Betty: The reason we have come here today to talk about Sammy is that I would like for success to mean something. If we keep looking at Sammy as a Grade 2 student . . . it won't. Sammy is not doing anything right now academically that indicates Sammy is a Grade 2 student.

The Ontario Government outlines in each curriculum area what each student is expected to accomplish by the end of any given Grade level. For example, at the end of Grade 1 a student is expected to be able to identify some reading strategies and retell known stories and use stated and implied information in texts to make inferences. Sammy struggles with many aspects of reading and had not met the end-of-year criteria for Grade 1. The committee questions Sammy's current progress.

Betty: (*Ummm*) Sammy has made a lot of progress since last year
 Sammy's attitude is most notably . . . we are seeing a really happy
 student. Sammy is more positive coming in, it used to be . . . I had
 Sammy last year in Grade 1 as well, last year quite frequently
 Sammy would come into the room, see how the world was
 working and go into a ball on the futon in our classroom . . . and it
 would take a while for Sammy to decide to participate in the class
 at all

The committee asks why I think there has been a change?

Betty: I don't know, Sammy has grown up a lot over the summer. Sammy
 seems more confident and just happier with how things are
 happening in his world. Sammy is feeling safe. I think having two
 years in K in the same room and then having two years in the same
 room for two different grades I think has led Sammy to a feeling of
 security Sammy really needed. Thank you for the 1/2 combined
 because it has really worked out well for Sammy. Sammy is

embracing the idea of doing it like a Grade 2. Now when it comes to academics, Sammy is not doing it like a Grade 2.

The committee questions what grade level I feel Sammy is working at.

Betty: Sammy is academically late K or early 1. . . . We have spent a lot of time talking about Sammy the last two years and the word that keeps coming up is inconsistent. You might do an evaluation with him on Monday and Sammy gets 20 of his upper case letters On Thursday you might get a different 20 . . . or you might get 22, or 8. . . . We struggled so much with Sammy last year not being a black cloud every day. . . . This year we haven't seen it. . . . Sammy will have a little moment of it but then it turns around (*snap*) all you have to do is give Sammy a couple of kind words. . . . Sammy will actively try to solve the problem. . . . Sammy won't just lie in a ball and not function which is what happened last year. . . . It's taken a lot of people to get Sammy here . . . lots of kind faces in the hall . . . and on another positive note this year mom came to meet the teacher night. . . . She feels welcomed. . . . She feels part of what is happening here.

The image of the ideal student at the board level conforms to the Ontario curricular expectations and assessment strategies. Gee (2011) spoke of the purposes or function of what is said; he refers to “the doing and not just saying tool” for examining language: “When people communicate they are trying to do things with each utterance

and with a whole set of utterances taken together” (p. 47). I find myself returning to the language that I think the committee understands. Table 1 explains what I said and the intention of each statement.

Table 1

Language Comprehensible by the ISRC

My Words	My Intent
<p>The reason we have come here today to talk about Sammy is that I would like for success to mean something, if we keep looking at Sammy as a Grade 2 student . . . it won't. Sammy is not doing anything right now academically that indicates Sammy is a Grade 2 student.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For his success to mean something we have to look at Sammy's learning as compared to itself. Without the approval of the committee I cannot speak to Sammy's progress as I can only speak to what he does not do as a Grade 2. This is the initial appeal I made to the committee in hopes that Sammy will be seen as a learner not necessarily a grade-specific learner.
<p>Sammy has made a lot of progress since last year Sammy's attitude is most notably . . . we are seeing a really happy student. Sammy is more positive coming in, it used to be . . . I had Sammy last year in Grade 1 as well, last year quite frequently Sammy would come into the room, see how the world was working and go into a ball on the futon in our classroom . . . and it would take a while for Sammy to decide to participate in the class at all.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wanted the committee to understand that Sammy now sees value in school where he did not previously. • I am explaining growth that the committee does not generally ask about in hopes that Sammy will be seen as a capable and growing learner.
<p>Sammy is embracing the idea of doing it like a Grade 2. Now when it comes to academics, Sammy is not doing it like a Grade 2.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here again I am hoping the committee will alter the lens with which I view Sammy—the Ontario Curriculum. He is a learner.
<p>Sammy is academically late K or early 1 . . . we have spent a lot of time talking about Sammy the last two years and the word that keeps coming up is inconsistent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again I am speaking to explaining that Sammy is learning at his speed and does not match grade-expected criteria.
<p>You might do an evaluation with him on Monday and Sammy gets 20 of his upper case letters . . . on Thursday you might get a different 20 . . . or you might get 22, or 8. We struggled so much with Sammy last year not being a black cloud every day; this year we haven't seen it . . . Sammy will have a little moment of it but then it turns around (<i>snap</i>). All you have to do is give Sammy a couple of kind words . . .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observational data are rarely asked for. This I think is a key element in understanding where a student struggles on a daily basis. I point again to his developing ability to refocus his energy in a positive way and state that he has issues with consistently doing tasks. I am hoping that they will see this as a possible reason to make further testing a priority.
<p>Sammy will actively try to solve the problem. . . . Sammy won't just lie in a ball and not function which is what happened last year</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again I speak to his ability to do. Active problem solving is also not something the committee will question.

It's taken a lot of people to get Sammy here . . . lots of kind faces in the hall . . . and on another positive note this year mom came to meet the teacher night . . . she feels welcomed . . . she feels part of what is happening here.

- I have never been asked a question about family other than to inquire if there is family support. I mention Sammy's mother as I feel connected to her struggle to learn how her son learns and hope the committee will see this as growth and potential as well.
 - I longed to connect with my child's school. I made this a priority and spent much focused time connecting Sammy, the school, and the parent.
-

In "How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit," Gee (2011) stated: "For any communication ask not just what the speaker is saying, but what he or she is trying to do, keeping in mind that he or she may be trying to do more than one thing" (p. 196).

Through looking at what I said and reflecting on my intentions I am becoming keenly aware that each year I speak of the student not doing work that is specified in the Ontario Curriculum. I used the phrase "doing it like a Grade 2," meaning the student does not academically match the curricular profile of the average Grade 2 student. By using this phrase I am judging this student based on the school board and provincial image of the ideal Grade 2 student whose abilities fit the Ontario Provincial expectations.

The committee praised my efforts and cajoled that I should be teaching other grades in crisis. They tell me that being in my class for two years has undoubtedly made this student grow and blossom. This makes me very uncomfortable. I want the process to be about Sammy and wonder how I became the focus. For this committee to allow for what I feel the child needs I need to be seen as competent and knowledgeable about what Sammy needs to foster his education and the child in deficit: "Viewing children as deficient leads special education to direct its efforts toward forcing the child to change in order to fit or be accepted. This approach legitimates behavioural and medical management techniques which attempt to 'fix' the child" (Sapon-Shevin, 1989, p. 92). I am making the child fit the imaginary mould, an ideal constructed outside their ability,

interest and sometimes their capability. From the perspective of the committee a child having deficits does not fit the image of the ideal student, because he or she cannot meet standardized assessment criteria.

When the questions are as to his academic progress as seen in his report card marks, the committee asks if the student will receive R's on their report card. The Ontario Government's, *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools*, has stated that a code R indicates "achievement that falls below level 1(D) and is used in the evaluation of reporting achievement in Grades 1 to 8" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 41). it is meant to be a signal that learning in a specific area has not been achieved. It is also seen as an indicator that the child's learning needs have not been met. The implicit message is that an ideal student meets provincial standards.

The factor that seems to be a thread that brings together the notes home in Chapter 2 and the language I used in ISRC revolve around the work of words like "I" and "we" Gee spoke of communication and context (Gee, 2011). Communications is shared knowledge. We are situated by what we do, who we are, what we share, and what we hold back. What the speaker says and context form what we mean. Sounds like such a simple balance equation when in reality it is a very complex, elegant dance where all participants are not necessarily listening to the same music. In a *we* context, the student I have presented would have said many things, as would their parent. Still, the reality is that the ideal student at a provincial level aligns with the Ontario provincial curriculum.

In looking back on this process I realize that analyzing my words poses a bit of a challenge. What I wanted to say and what I said are completely at odds. I say that I want Sammy's success to mean something. I think Sammy is successful as Sammy is learning.

This is not based on measures using a standardized test but rather on my observation of his positive attitude towards coming to school. What I am really saying is that we do not value Sammy's success as a learner because it does not fit within the expectations of the Ontario curriculum.

In presenting as Sammy's teacher I am also there as Patrick and Ryan's parent. Being a parent has changed the trajectory of how I regard the parent teacher relationship. I only wish it had been a more complete reminder on how I should have regarded Sammy. Perhaps, as I would come to see in Chapter 5, I would have said his name less often as correction.

CHAPTER 5

STUDENTING THE RELUCTANT LEARNER: FASHIONING MY IDEAL

Vignette

My two sons entered school in very different manners. Patrick was hesitant; his first kindergarten teacher could see in our eyes that it was best to not share how much he cried each day but to focus on how much he enjoyed helping her and being glued to her leg was being framed as being her class helper. Patrick graduated College with honours. Ryan's entry into school was completely different. He entered the room with zeal and vigour, much to the chagrin of most of his teachers. He started each day looking to meet his new best friend. This did not persist. Eventually he would be the boy who wanted to stay home. I actually sent him to his first day of high school mistaking the stomach flu for the first day jitters. Thankfully, he outgrew the nickname "barf boy." He did not graduate college or university. He started with palpable enthusiasm for going to school. As his story unfolded he grew into reluctance.

Ryan loves computers which I have come to embrace as a metaphor for who he is as a learner. He is larger than life and should be appreciated for all that he is. Nunberg (2001) tried to paint a picture describing the internet which immediately gave me a mental picture of my youngest son. Although those familiar with technology describe the internet's expansive qualities with glee using words like surfing and wide-opened, one less experienced would use a different metaphor. "The thing is that is when you get on the net it really doesn't feel much like any of these. It's hard to imagine anything that's less like the ocean, the prairie, the cosmos, or the highway . . . if you're looking for a good metaphor for the internet in fact, go to Venice in February." This is Ryan. He is like jogging in the fog through a wonderful, unfamiliar vacation spot. There's is so much to see and if you are really lucky you might trip over something memorable, but it is all moving so fast!

Ryan was born to us shortly after Patrick or more accurately he burst onto the scene. His nickname is tangent man; he changes conversation topics faster than most people can change their socks. We celebrate this quality and have even planned themed events to honour his energy. When taking him on play dates when he was a toddler we often heard the phrase, "Is he ever energetic!" We had many trips to the emergency ward of our local hospital for everything from almost biting his tongue off while running to cracking the back of his head on the slide he ran down to experimenting with the electric barbeque starter. This was Ryan! He is and was warm, delightful, infinitely empathetic, and ACTIVE! We learned very early on to never take your eyes off of him. This is surely not the complete picture of who he is. His first teacher wrote on his report card: "Ryan could be the world's youngest philosopher." He would connect and infuse much of what he learned in school to whatever he was exploring out of school. Most notably his sense of caring. His natural sense of empathy was palpable. As he progressed through school my spouse and I lovingly referred to Ryan as our "but" child. This came in reference to his report card learning skills comments. "He does have his good days but always seems to regress to his original pattern." Everything after the illusive "but" seemed to negate who we saw as our son. Yearly, the suggestion was made. "Have you ever considered

asking his doctor about his attention skills?” We had. What seemed hard to understand for his teachers was that we actively were choosing for a non-medication based approach. Why fix what’s not broken? The school spoke of deficits. Oddly, we did not regard what our son did as deficient. This was just who he was and is. We talked with him, taught him to try to stop, think, and act. We praised and rewarded. We tried many failed attempts to teach him organizational skills. I still believe he will, with great surprise, meet himself on the way home one day. It is no small irony that Ryan is most comfortable with technology where expanse and excess are the norm.

He was the round peg in the square hole his whole primary and junior schooling. He did not like primary/junior school, or middle school. He liked high school only in his last year when we moved from Chatham, Ontario (a very small town) to Brampton. His involvement in social justice issues made him come alive in his final year of high school. He also said a larger school afforded him the opportunity to be more anonymous. He did not graduate from university; he still needs three credits. He felt it was not a good fit for him. He switched to college. He did not graduate from college. To us, he is successful by every measure that matters.

At Christmas break 2009 he disappeared to his room in the basement. We found our 23-year-old son in tears. He failed courses—plural. He sees himself as a scholar, and decided to self-identify and acknowledge his attentional difficulties in college to try to ensure his success. He approached the learning disabilities support people of his college. The school had given him a bursary to help with tuition based on his identification. They gave him a distraction free environment for writing examinations. He even tried medication. He did not like the side effects. Despite being in an area where he has enormous self-confidence and comfort he did not pass his final exams. To say the least, when someone who has a comfort level with technology cannot excel at computer networking it made me pause again. We read course outlines and syllabi for his classes. While the school does not espouse this idea many of the classes stated: “Students must pass the term work in order to write the final exam. Students must also pass the final exam to pass the course.” One area of school that has been a source of struggle for Ryan has been writing exams. He loves to write and read. He attacked writing opportunities in University with zeal, read constantly and will willingly argue and discuss with anyone who will engage. I began to think about my role as a parent, my choices as a professional, my school board, my classroom, and my assessments.

Hallway Cute

Our beliefs about learning and teaching are largely tacit. We operate a good deal of the time from an intuitive sense of what is going on without actively reflecting on what our intentions might be and what our actions could be saying to students.

—Judith Newman, “Learning to Teach by Uncovering Our Assumptions” (

Each year I have had a student in my class who does not want to be a student.

They are learners, not students. These learners are strikingly similar to my youngest son who would stay home at any possible excuse. One of the teachers in my school coined

these students as “hallway cute.” I had never heard this as a description of a student before. She explained it means that he is sweet and nice to talk to in the hallway; you just don’t want this person in your classroom. I don’t like the label *hallway cute* but I understood what my colleague was trying to say. Hallway cute meant they were nice enough children; they were just not students per se.

The student my colleague described as hallway cute is very easy to spot in a school environment. This student arrives late every day for school then hides in hallways and spends extra time each day folding a winter coat carefully. No one seems to know why they’re still in the hallway; delaying going into the classroom seems to be the ultimate goal. This student may be the cause of changes to classroom routine. This person has stood on the porcelain bathroom fixtures, flung things at the ceilings or gotten lost in the process of using the facilities that oddly enough are exactly next door to their classroom. Safety becomes the concern. An adult must walk this student to the facilities. For this student a teacher escort has become the norm. This person’s lunch norms include spraying people with a juice box, chasing bigger students and tormenting them, and doing literally whatever seems to pop into his or her brain.

While this is a challenging child I know the reality of their school experience will be difficult for them. It would seem nothing about these students fits the identity of an ideal student. Comber described the ideal student as one who “was not simply an isolated competitive worker or even an active learner, but a socially responsible community member”(Comber, 1997, p. 401). I began to question the language we use to describe students. I also questioned what I did to support these descriptions.

In this chapter I will examine recordings of my teaching to show the work that my language does to reinforce an image of my ideal student. In particular, I will look at Sammy, the student I presented to ISRC and one of the hallway cute for the year the data were collected and how my language contributed to defining who he is as a student, and how I reinforced this definition through studenting rather than teaching and learning.

Studenting and Creating the Reluctant Learner

Studenting is not what is being taught, it is the daily expectations of a student in the classroom. It is how we “play the game” of school. Goldin (2011) referred to studenting as being “comprised of the activities and tasks that students must engage in to learn; studenting is understood to be the means to learning outcomes.” Listening to my language use in my recordings made me realize studenting was occurring in my classroom.

Transcription from September 20, 2010

Betty: Mark yourself in and straight to the carpet. Get your name to sign in and head to the carpet please. Good Job. Why don't we line up here so we are not crowded around the board. Join the line please. You're going to find a book and sit on the carpet. Good Job.

My ideal student conforms. This process continued for 15 minutes in the same format: Do this, praise, do this, praise. The first time I listened to my recording I was struck by the fact that I ask an abundance of questions. “What do you think?” “Can you add to your friend's thinking?” I ask students to explain what they understand rather than lecturing. The transcription of what I said in the classroom included an abundance of student talk as well but what struck me was the number of times I say the name of one

student in my class: Sammy. He resists studenting. Each time I redirect Sammy to alter what he has chosen to do I am in essence telling him he has made a poor choice. It means he is talking instead of listening, being a distraction to peers, or doing something other than what my ideal student should be doing. I say his name each and every day more than any other without fail. The frequency with which I say this name shocked me. On October 14th I called out Sammy's name five times in the first fifteen minutes of the day

Transcription from September 14, 2010

Betty: Good morning, Sammy. Sammy, join the line. Sammy, then go to the carpet. Now National Anthem . . . straight and tall . . . your hands are empty . . . no one is speaking and we are quiet during the announcements as well my friends, Sammy . . . now a reminder during announcements we need to hear anything important. We need to stay very silent. Thank you, boys and girls . . . My friends, we are not speaking, we are listening.

My ideal student listens in silence; I do not. During this time period I found it distressing to hear that my teaching partner and I spoke and communicated daily trivial matters during the announcements and national anthem "In essence, one of the radical differences between education as a dominating and dehumanizing task and education as a humanistic and liberating task is that the former is a pure act of transference and knowledge, whereas the latter is an act of knowledge" (Freire, 1985, p. 114). What I hear and feel in this recording is discord; discord between what I feel I want to empower students with, the power to choose, and teaching them to conform and do as everyone else does.

Transcription from September 14, 2010

Betty: You're going to hear something at our assembly today about polite audience behaviour. Polite audience behaviour is listening ears, in the set position, looking at the speaker. Can you please show me set position for the hallway. Whoakiss your brains!

My ideal student is quiet and compliant. The beginning of the school year is when establishing what we do as class norms happens to keep classroom functions somewhat ordered. My teaching partner and I agreed on many things. We were selective about the language we would use to communicate the more regimented choices that keep a busy Grade 1/2 class going. We ask for "set position" to ask students to sit facing the speaker, hands in laps ensures that in this large group fingers are not stepped on. We don't say the phrase "I like how you are sitting" because we want our students to value their choices. Twenty minutes of this morning were spent on instruction of how to be a student. We were preparing for our first whole school assembly. This would be the first time our class was part of a whole school activity. The primary reason for this assembly was to communicate what responsibility means. I was sitting in a rocking chair with the students all seated on the rug in front of me. The lesson could be titled "How to Conform."

My ideal student conforms to the values of the group without question. I state that polite is valued and describe what polite looks like. I reward polite choices with "kiss your brains." Conforming is not thinking but I have equated the two quite easily. Secondly, how I was studenting instead of teaching. In my description of polite audience behaviour I have communicated many ideas.

The ideal school is orderly, not messy or disordered in its outward presentation. I want to value choice and the voice of my students. I have come to understand that this aspiration is not followed by action that facilitates it. I too grant permission to those who conform. In time I would come to understand that this was a powerful reflection with the power to transform what I do into tangible action; reflection could become reflexive practice. This realization would help to tidy up one mess and start a whole new one that I would welcome with open arms.

CHAPTER 6

CLEANING UP THE MESS

Be messy; two simple words that came to be the soft voice of reason in my classroom, words found as graffiti on the wall of a school. In fact, it became the thread that has woven together the fabric of this thesis. Be messy were not my words. When painted on the walls these words were considered by some graffiti. To me they were a divine academic intervention of sorts. The universe seemed to be saying, “Wake up, Betty, read the writing on the wall.” It made me take notice that the ideal school is not necessarily a place of control and order. I think mess and learning have become synonymous in my lexicon. What I am starting to understand is that we are part of the artificial construct of the ideal when what we should be pursuing is a relationship with the real—a relationship with our students and their curriculum.

At a Saturday meeting in May 2012, Jerry Harste offered words of encouragement and a challenge. To paraphrase, he said my thesis was progressing nicely but he wondered if I could spend a little time looking at the language of the personal anecdotes from the chapters. He said it would be interesting if I could analyze my own anecdotes. Could I get arm’s length with my own story? He also asked if I could reconsider my criticisms of the school board’s intentions when penning notes home and the construction of their website. Could I be a little bit less critical or harsh as to their intent? Enthusiastically, I said I would try. The whole process has been such incredible learning; the most profound I have ever done to date.

My thesis has evolved and developed through a year and a half of a messy, busy life. I wrote when I injured my back in what a specialist called a reading-related injury: I

hunched over books, documents, and in front of my laptop without enough breaks to stretch. I persisted with my writing while I helped my parents settle into a retirement home, I experienced funerals, illnesses, and a bout of insomnia that had me on an emotional rollercoaster. I wrote and sifted through this astounding process while I experienced the profound loss of my own father.

Dr. Manning barred me from reading for a period of time and relegated me to only writing. “Writing forces meaning,” became his mantra. He was right. My committee kept telling me that each breakdown of a personal nature was par for the course but it did make me pay attention to the mess that is life. It became a source of reflection when I thought of my students, their struggles, their lives, their messes. The end result has been an awareness of what I do as a teacher. I don’t believe that when you ask yourself the question “Why do I do what I do?” that you can ever have a completely full answer. I did however become more keenly aware of how my identity and my actions and choices are inexorably linked. The ideal has unwittingly but willingly also become a force in my practice.

At the beginning of my thesis my first vignette tells the tale of being a new parent. I can’t imagine a more glorious, joyful mess than being a new parent. With the love, lack of sleep, and ineptitude mixed with the desire to do the best you can it is the essence of what teaching means. When you come to realize the idea that your child may be developing along an atypical path the sense of wonder you feel does not change, fear is however heightened. Learning becomes not about an arbitrary milestone or benchmark on a learning continuum. It is not about being perfect, identical, or matched to some exterior criterion. When your child has challenges the ideal child is one who embraces learning

and grows in their own capacity. In actuality, it is a reality of any learner. The real challenge is in how you define learning. Learning becomes change that is valued. The personal evolution for my practice comes in the realization that I need to continue to recognize the value in what they, the students, value as learning. Go to where they are, not push them to an imaginary ideal. Or, why not ask what the learner wants to learn. A student can be developing, learning, changing, evolving and yet be told they are coming up short. Learning that is valued is that which is in line with the provincial standard. This spoke volumes to me. It also became painfully apparent that this is not what I have conveyed to families and children. I have become more conscious my acts of agency in presenting and perpetrating the ideal. I am also becoming vigilant in my conscious choice to keep it real with my students, parents, and colleagues.

Looking at my vignettes and considering the research I examined still leaves me feeling isolated. This image of the ideal left me as a parent on the outside looking in. It is where I realized that others would not see my own children with the awe and wonder with which I regard them. It is where I came to understand that I do not connect parents to their child's learning. I realized that I was the outsider looking in and at times this would be the reality of my children as well. I find myself listening with great care to what is said about parents, students and the judgments we make. Everything from lunch bags, to clothes to the frequency with which homework is done would be assessed, judged, and pronounced. Be careful of what finger you point. The website I deconstructed from the Peel District School Board seemed to paint a picture of parents who are caring, value learning, and are attentive. What it also has as a subtext is that the learning is also value laden. Learning is for the print literate. It brought to mind of my new school where the

largest proportion of families are unemployed, underemployed or at the very least struggling. The website does not speak to families who are struggling. This experience has made me very mindful of the very privilege from which I speak. I am safe, fed, and educated. I have power. Dr. Vasquez once commented on the use of the phrase “language is powerful” in my thesis. It is in this vignette that I began to embrace what this actually means. It also spoke to the connectedness that students need in their classrooms. We share a sense of humanness that needs to be acknowledged.

My vignettes are a reminder of my humanness. In the first chapter of my thesis I tell the story of becoming a parent. I share how having our children was a life-altering experience. I share the joy, anticipation, and trepidations of young parenthood. I share the realization that Patrick our eldest began to losing oral language skills around his first birthday and end the anecdote with the explanation of his first diagnostic identity. Even though this anecdote was written about a time that was almost 30 years ago I am keenly connected to it in a visceral and highly emotionally charged manner. It shocks me how much this still causes me to react. I am almost 50 years old and still I tear up when I consider the phone call from a paraprofessional that could have altered Patrick’s future greatly. It is not that he would have a diagnostic label; it is that he would be perceived by others as having a deficit. Perhaps part of the dilemma is that an attempt was made to disrupt the image of my “perfect” child. Here is where I begin to question the intentions of any institution that would give council to families, even one as proactive and positive as my own school board. I am coming to understand that my distrust of institutions including the school board may be founded in my first encounter with an institution. If

Neil and I had agreed with the first diagnosis it would have rerouted our son's future. It is the beginning of a relationship rooted in pronouns—I and me versus we and they.

What next caught my attention is how often I use the pronoun “we” in this anecdote. In the first paragraph of “Becoming a Mom” I use the pronoun “we” 10 times. This pronoun situated my identity as a collaborative family unit; we—couple and family. Language works to position people and define their relationships to one another (Davies & Harre, 1990). The value of family as an identity is situated in the use of the word we.

Patrick's first misdiagnosis came at a crossroads time for our family. We had a choice to make: to enroll our son in school or to wait. We would be called as a family to trust the school system. As a teacher this event has led me to take care in conveying that the child and the diagnostic identity are separate identities. One is a person, the other the lens with which to view the person. You are not an autistic person; you are a person who has autism. I am very aware of words and their impact. That is very evident when I read my anecdotes throughout this thesis.

If the ideal is the compliant learner it misses the idea that the active learner is and can actually be a learner. An active learner can be one who loves learning, reading, and questioning and dislikes the sedate aspects of school. This was the chapter that made me the most uncomfortable. The act of hearing my voice continually saying the name of the student who needed the most guidance in a corrective manner forced me to see how my voice can be used as an instrument of change and reinforcement of the ideal. I ask questions of the bulk of the class and redirect the student who is struggling by continually saying only their name. It was humbling and embarrassing. It is something I will never forget. It is taking my practice to a deeper, more critical level. Again, the idea that

learning is not controlled, calm and collected. It can be chaos with purpose. It made me wonder if a child ever begins to dislike their own name. It made me connect that I have been an agent of this process.

Chapter 3 was my first experience with a “we and they” relationship that divided parent and teacher. It is also where I begin to speak of myself in the first person using the pronoun “I.” This one letter word speaks volumes to me and the disconnection experienced by me as a parent with the schools my sons attended. This also strikes a chord with regard to the ire I direct at the school board. I have not considered their intention in sending notes home or creating the school board website. I have spent considerable time attending to what the reader would see.

In Chapter 4, I wrote the following passage about an important day in the life of my son Ryan: “2009 at Christmas break he disappeared to his room in the basement. We found our 23-year-old son in tears. He failed courses—plural. He sees himself as a scholar, and decided to self-identify and acknowledge his attentional difficulties.”

Again, I am struck how time and experience does not change the emotional impact that being a parent has on my perceptions as an educator. Judith Newman speaks of critical incidents as events that show with clarity the importance of a happening. They are not huge, monumental occurrences but moments that clarify our thinking (Newman, 1987). This anecdote was one such moment. My son’s tears, as well as my own, and the vision he held of himself as a failure are connected to my general distrust of testing and curriculum as a measurement of the learner. The ideal student does their work and tests well. Ryan loves learning but is a reluctant student. In the anecdote I speak of having four children; the two I know and the two that go to school. This speaks to the idea that as the

system of education currently exists parents cannot know their children as students in a school because they do not experience their children in this forum. It makes me wonder what I could do as a classroom teacher to create a learning community that would include families.

In exploring the data for chapter 4 on the ISRC process and my own teaching I tried to focus both the vignette and the perceptions of the words I express to and about the children, not who I am. I was naive to think that I could ever tease identity and issue apart as separate entities. How does one bind together that which does not fit? The reality is the two were never separate. In hearing my words in class conformity seems to be the norm. The ideal sounds like cookie cutter children and parents, the reality is more like sprinkles on a cupcake: Many lovely confections, all unique.

Class and school board websites, in-school review and placement committees for special needs students, and even standardized curriculum are vehicles of common communication. Each communication is positive in tone and aimed at inspiring the reader to connect in a positive way to education and educational institutions. I have been hard in many ways on the school board and their intentions when communicating with parents. They are in the practice of trying to work with families. Their intentions are positive.

The one area I cannot reconcile is the note home. It was penned by school board and written in agreement with the teachers' federation. It caused in me the greatest disconnect both in language and content, the one area where I have not been able to presume positive intentions is this particular part of my thesis. The notes seem to have a tone of children who can do and children who cannot. Perhaps this too speaks to my fear that perceptions of my children would have them seen as people who cannot do.

The note has one additional perspective summed up by one word. The word that has not appeared in this document thus far is the one area where I do not feel all parties are in it for the good of all concerned: politics. My thesis has not been a political vehicle yet I have struggled to keep it from careening into political arenas. Curriculum, the definition of special needs, funding, are all part of the mosaic of learning in public education. Money and politics do play a part in education. That is a thesis for another writer and another day.

In his keynote address at the Western Australia Reading Conference in 1993, Andrew Manning (1993) referred to curriculum as conversation:

There is an envisaged curriculum, an enacted curriculum and a real curriculum. The envisaged curriculum is a paper curriculum that is usually handed on to teachers. These can be state guides, set texts or prescribed methodologies, they are often the hallucinations of people who have little to do with kids and the classroom. The enacted curriculum is our day to day bumbling attempts to enact the envisaged curriculum. . . . The real curriculum is what goes on in the mind of the student, the mental trip, the lived experience. It is the sense they make of what is going on in our classrooms. (p. 2)

Learning is making sense of the lived experience. If curriculum as conversation could include all voices that are part of the reality of the child—the child, their families, the teachers—what would it sound like?

The ISRC meeting opened with the phrase “We are here to talk about a student of interest.” Students are of interest. Words like interest and special are beginning to take on a more divergent meaning. Families are part of the process. I need to be especially vigilant of the subtle and not so subtle ways we silence their voice.

With what I do in the classroom, how I feel as parent and teacher I still manage to communicate the ideal in subtle and not so subtle ways. Gee challenges us to challenge social practices. The use of electronic communication has become a more commonplace

community of practice (Gee, 2000). In my creation of my website I managed to find yet another way to perpetuate the myth of the ideal. I am saying that there is one way to be literate, one way to learn.

The graffiti “Be Messy” has been a metaphor for this thesis and what I do as a teacher. It is a common thread that comfortably wove the elements of my work together. It started with the discovery of the graffiti on the wall and led to questioning what mess means. It didn’t mean finding order in the face of chaos. It meant accepting mess as learning. The question became the one I hesitated most to ask of myself. Am I willing to put myself in the same messy predicament as my students? Would looking at what I do transform my practice? The act of questioning the notes I send home, the words I write on a website and, most acutely the words I say in my classroom have become an act of critical awareness of the words and world around me. What became most surprising was how much my identity as mother and teacher were linked. I am a person situated in time and space with the experience of two lenses. What I need to learn is the ability to permit both identities to work in tandem and continually question them both. The two give me a potential power to critically see what I do, what I encounter with a more critical dual lens.

Perhaps it is not the ideal or perception of ideal that has been the most acutely impacted by the writing of this thesis but rather the refocusing of what needs to be the lens with which I teach and see families, students, and teachers. It is not the ideal but the real which has become more keenly of what I am becoming aware of. In *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling* Gee (2004) spoke of creating spaces of belongingness which seems to be at odds with the artificial elements of the classroom experience. In developing a repertoire of how we communicate with

parents, students and colleagues how often do we utter “What works for me is . . .” What I have begun to consider is opening the doors and windows of the classrooms to let in parents, students, colleagues and, indeed, anyone else interested to become part of the community of learners. In creating an “affinity space”(Gee, 2004, p. 77), I have opened up to parents who are struggling with children who have diagnostic labels that include pervasive developmental disorders by sharing my story as a parent and, with his permission, the journey of my son Patrick. I cannot say I fully comprehend their reality, I can say I know some of the steps on their journey. My classroom affinity includes children who need social workers to cope with the day to day of their reality. It includes DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time that is never silent because the students don’t relate to silent reading. They relate to action, music, art and use many means to convey a love of what they are currently passionate about. It is messy and it works for them. It includes electronic communications to families written by both myself and the younger learners of the classroom. It includes paper newsletters sent home twice to families that live in more than one location that are written by the students. It is complicated and requires a lot of talking to each other as people. Make no mistakes, the relationship of teacher and student is hierarchical but what I am trying to embrace is the humanness of the interaction as well.

When I began my thesis I wrote one additional vignette. It was my apology note. I opened the file to see if the process of questioning why I do what I do has altered it in any way. My thesis has been many things. It’s about seeing for the forest for the trees while simultaneously being one of the trees. I wonder if forests are messy. That is a metaphor for another day.

Vignette: An Apology Note to Those I Have Taught

Dear Ones,

To write this note I have to begin with the face of who I am apologizing. I am opening my words and my heart to the sons I have taught and along with my spouse I have raised. I am writing to those I have been privileged to teach as an educator in the classroom. I speak to the minds and the hearts of the guardians of my students. Indeed the list of those I have to speak of and to is lengthy and varied. I need to start with why I am sorry. I am sorry for the times when I did not know what I should have known to be in such a powerful position. I did not fully comprehend the impact of my hubris. An Arabian proverb says that arrogance dismisses wisdom. In my case it ignored the wisdom of those I have taught on numerous occasions. Each of you possessed valuable wisdom on the one you are best experts on: your own needs and desires. You are experts on you. I did not let you fully into our learning when I did not fully see who you are. To be specific I would like to ask forgiveness for not knowing the questions to ask to protect your integrity. You are mighty, individual, beautiful, wise, and wonderful. It was my privilege to witness these qualities in you. I failed on many occasions to fully appreciate this. I let you fall prey to the whimsy of what I felt I could not control. Control is an illusion that I believed. I let you drift in the breeze between what you needed in order to be valued learners and the politics of power and privilege. I could have done more. Whether it was not challenging the system that taught my son's to the degree they deserved or bending to the forces that I felt would diminish the spirits of the students in my world or ignoring the love and vital knowledge that guardians have, in each case, I fell short. We never really got to see the full splendour of you. For the times when I ignored learning for studenting, for this I am deeply regretful. This act I did with both family and students. Correcting your behaviour because I wanted to teach you to behave taught you so much more. It spoke volumes to your ability as learners. I diminished your capacity as active participants in your own learning. For the times when I put the agenda of teaching and my agenda first I must also say sorry. I sent snuggle up and read books with kindergarteners not knowing that their loved ones were already living literacy at home and interrupted their journey as lifelong lovers of learning. I have no reason, no excuse except to say I too am a student. I am not a human being but rather a human becoming.

Betty McClung

EPILOGUE: NEW MESS, NEW LOCATION

We often cause ourselves suffering by wanting only to live in a world of valleys, a world without struggle and difficulty, a world that is flat, plain, consistent.

—bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, p. 71

Learning is a struggle. Writing a thesis certainly is one fight worth having with yourself. Classroom teachers see students in so many prescribed ways. The lenses changes with each way we view our students. We see them as people with histories, families, and cultures that individuate them within our schools. “The social context of the classroom frames and generates literate behaviours, intentionally and unintentionally” (Luke, 1997, “Apprenticing at Language in Homes and Communities,” para. 2). We see them as citizens of our school. This lens illuminates how well they enact their identity as student. Do they play the school game? Do they know the rules? We view with the filter of the standardized curriculum. Are they meeting provincial standard? This lens directly influences who we present to ISRC. We are biased; they are *our* students! Teachers, including myself, can be very proprietary. There are so many ways to see these students.

My goal is to teach happy students who feel successful as learners. My hope is to empower them as people, capable of success in and out of school. Success is measured in so many different ways. It can be as simple as a question posed in a safe environment, a risk taken in one’s learning. It can be in saying the phrase ‘I don’t know’ and coming to understand what you know today is learning. It can be feeling safe enough, secure enough to engage in something that does not rest within a learner’s comfort zone; doing something that you perceive as outside your capabilities knowing that you are safe. I want all this and more for my students. Do my words and actions match?

When I look back to my own sons I realize that how success is defined can define the person. Ryan has started a career. Through a conversation at his part-time job (talking was something he was chided for doing too often) he was offered to start a career at a company that would combine his two passions: computers and people. He says he wants to finish University and College. I confess I have nagged him about finishing. That speaks to what I value in education. Does the piece of paper open doors? Does it mean success? Is my ideal son a graduate? We say grades are not important but do we mean it? My spouse, who is also a teacher, recently said to his class, “Here I am trying to tell you all you have to continue to school to finish things and my son gets a great job without finishing school.” My spouse Neil and I are sending similar messages. Ryan is excited about the direction his life is heading. We join him in his excitement as a family. From all indications as an outsider it seems to be a good job, with benefits and a future that will afford him the opportunity to do what he loves. He comes home each day excited, with stories about his daily encounters and tired. These are all good indicators of a successful day. This gave me pause for thought:

Critical incidents are those occurrences that let us see with new eyes some aspects of what we do. Although we aren’t generally aware of it, everything we do in the classroom is founded on a set of beliefs about learning and teaching, about knowledge, and about what counts as legitimate reading and writing. (Newman, 1990, p. 17)

I am the parent of a child. His school asked us to consider identifying him as a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Patrick his older brother had been identified in congress with our wishes. We fought Ryan’s diagnostic label. Is my ideal child one who is not identified? My real child is magnificent, so are the children in my classroom. Their parents will attest to this.

Patrick was identified as a student with exceptionalities. When we moved to Brampton in his graduating year of high school he, much to our surprise, explained that he would not accept resource help. Neil and I, mouths agape, sat silent. His guidance counsellor said that it would be up to Patrick to seek help if he needed. Patrick said he understood. We agreed. On the way home we asked him why. He said he could do it on his own. He was right. It took him a couple of tries to graduate college. When he did, it was as a DSW, developmental services worker. He graduated with honours. He is now a teaching assistant in the school board that employs both his parents. He penned a line in his resume that encapsulates who he is in his 2008 resume cover letter:

I have not ardently pursued full time employment to afford myself the learning opportunity of working call-in positions at as many schools as possible. I have worked all grades at many Peel schools. I have assisted in DD classes, behaviour classes as well as fully integrated mainstream classes. What I have learned is that there are many different strategies and steps to help a student with learning, mobility, and organization. By doing so, I have learned that it takes a lot of patience in working with students with different types of special needs. I also know when not to help. Students need to try to do for themselves. (Patrick McClung, 2008)

When I began this thesis the idea was to turn reflection into reflexive practice. The goal was to take an understanding of my location, my identity and use it as a vehicle to transform what I do as an educator. I had the opportunity to attend a literacy conference and hear the words and works of Jerry Harste, Vivian Vasquez, and Allan Luke. They reminded me that the “New Basics” model says to read anything, something I espoused in my class website. Dr. Luke remarked of Halliday’s work that language is what it is because of the work it has to do. Dr. Harste and Dr. Vasquez added that we have a responsibility to see curriculum as a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be. That school should espouse multiple ways of knowing such as art, music, and drama. We need to see each self as literate and remember that culture was too

important to leave the idea on the school steps. We need to create agents of texts not victims. Education is inquiry, inquiry is education (Celebrating Literacy Conference, 2011).

With these ideals in mind I began to realize that my only option for reflexive practice would begin with taking me out of my comfort zone. In May of 2011 I began to apply to seek a change in schools. I applied to 11 schools. Several called my references which generally indicate that they were interested in possibly offering me a position. Two really piqued my interest. The first was a brand new school and came with the allure of being a place where I could build from the bottom up a new teaching and learning experience. The second was termed a struggling school where the biggest challenge faced by its pupils was poverty. In my interview I was asked what I could say about poverty and what it means to teaching. I asked the principal and vice-principal to explain what they meant when they said poverty and went on to explain that poverty can be many things. It can be pocket book, perception, and be many things when it is empowered to do so. I went home and a week later was awaiting a call to find if I was to be offered a job. I nervously talked with my spouse as to what I should do. If I had to choose, I felt I wanted to work at the school that accepted my broad definition of poverty. Their focus was on an active process of curriculum coming from the students. If I was offered the new school, should I say yes to that opportunity? I received one offer. I am at Sir Winston Churchill Public School. It is not new, it is not financially affluent, and I am excited to be here. I began the year with the picture book *The Pink Refrigerator* and asked my new students what the ideal classroom, student, and teacher are. I am planning to make what happens in our class our curriculum.

My epilogue is about what is next. I aspire to cocreating a curriculum that can come from the student's heads and hearts. In the first two days I learned that for the children in my new classroom they have an image of what is ideal. They think an ideal teacher would treat them fairly. They want a teacher who understands their thoughts. They want a teacher who is okay if they are moving. They think a teacher should listen to their ideas carefully and would like some choices over what happens in our classroom. One student said I was "a rich hippie." When I asked why the student said no one has ever asked them about what they wanted as much as I have. They said I ask a lot of questions.

The reality of my classroom is one where families are financially struggling which means the children struggle too. Am I an agent of the ideal? My privileged position as an educated person in a powerful position makes the answer an absolute yes, I can be. In asking my class to define the ideal I have absolutely confused them. I have asked them to think and am trying to empower them to see the ideal as they define who they are. They say they don't like reading and math. They went on to explain it is because they can't do either particularly well. I said I see them as literate. I am working towards seeing who they are and letting them understand who I am. Together I hope we can redefine what ideal means and use reality as a conduit for continued learning for all learners, including me.

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