

The Stories We Planted:

A Narrative Exploration of Evaluative School Experience

by

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Bachelor of Education, University of Regina, 1992

Master of Education, University of Victoria, 2005

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Abstract

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This study combines autoethnographies of the author's school experience with narratives of school experience as related by adult students who were not successful in school. The study evolved into a narrative exploration of notions of success and failure as they are conceptualized in school settings. Evaluative assessment experiences were examined as the seeds of the 'story of the self' that was planted in each of us as we reflected upon, and constructed through language, the social world of our school experiences through story. Various aspects of the power dynamics inherent in assessment processes are also examined in the context of the narratives. The placement of the adult students' narratives alongside the autoethnographies of the researcher reveals fascinating similarities and differences among the ways that each participant conceptualized his/her evaluative school experience.

Key words: assessment, evaluation, autoethnography, narrative, critical discourse analysis

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the Alices and Ambers and Hannahs that populate our classrooms. May we learn to truly believe that all children can learn, and to create conditions for growth in our classrooms where each of them can find their passions and become strong poets.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been a student, a student- teacher, a student again and a teacher of student teachers. There is something about these experiences that is consistent and pervasive and persistently troubling to me. Why is it that so much about the enactment of these roles is about measuring and being measured, judging and being judged?

What does it mean to be measured by others? Are there circumstances under which it is essential that we allow others to attribute value to who we are? When we are students, our actions and the things we produce are measured by our teachers all the time. When we are teachers, we don't just teach. We are required to study and measure and evaluate our students.

This is a process which is rarely called into question, yet the impact of evaluation processes in school contexts becomes part of how we decide what our personal value is. As students, we may learn to tell ourselves that we don't care about the measures applied to us by our teachers. As educators we may argue that what we are evaluating is the work that students produce for us, not the students themselves, but in actuality it is very difficult for all of us to make those distinctions. In the series of moments that make up the story of our school life, it is the *self* that is either valued or devalued as we *e-value*-ate and are *e-value*-ated.

Throughout our school years, the processes of evaluation are formalized and articulated into symbols which are recorded in report cards. Report cards are the official documents teachers are mandated to produce for the school and send home for parents. The symbols that are recorded inside the report cards are also mandated. Institutional governing bodies decide for teachers what these symbols will be – in most jurisdictions throughout the world, these symbols are either letter grades (A,B,C,D,E and F – 'A' representing success and 'F' representing

Failure) or percentage scores (a score out of 100 - 100% representing perfect attainment of educational standards, 49% representing Failure, 0% representing no attainment).

Like many other institutional documents, the appearance of report cards is deceptively ‘objective’ and bland, but report cards are *full* of stories. They mumble in shame and whisper in fear and declare in glee and shriek in excitement and shout in anger. They contain much more than grades; they contain the personalities of our student selves and of our teachers and our teacher selves. Like a familiar smell, or the strains of a melody that bring to mind a feeling or a long-forgotten memory, the sight and feel of a report card reminds us of our school years. We hold report cards reverently in our hands, we invoke prayers to them, we place them carefully in front of our parents or we hide them, we crumple and rip and tear them and throw them away, we frame them in wooden frames and place them on mantles. Report cards and grades become a metaphor for our successes and failures, and for the value and esteem in which we hold ourselves and others. They have power.

Power is an interesting notion that can be interpreted in many ways. It is a force that can be possessed, enacted, submitted to or resisted. Power can constrain and power can enable. Power can be seen as a web that surrounds us – a network of relationships that holds traditions in place. It is also seen as a hierarchical concept. We often speak of power as though those who possess it sit above and push it down upon those below. Power can be viewed in terms of its impact on people who are subjected to it. It can be a force of authority that is wielded for the purpose of controlling others, such as the power teachers are expected to exert over their students. The power that a report card possesses is an extension of the power of the teacher to control and manipulate students in classrooms.

Perhaps it is this power that troubles me the most. Perhaps it is the uncomfortable position of being a teacher who has to wield the power of the grade and the power of the report card that fuels my discomfort. Perhaps it is the prospect of the consequence of wielding that power that troubles me. As a teacher and as a student, I've feared this power and sought ways to be free of it. I have begun to realize that enactments of power are embedded in the culture of classrooms. It is not something that we can be freed of, but possibly we can become aware of it, and shift our relationship to it.

I want students to be 'empowered' - able to decide for themselves whether they 'measure up' or not, or whether they need to be measured at all. I want teachers to be aware of the power of tradition to hold ineffective practices in place. I particularly want teachers to be aware of the power we have to 'plant stories' in our students. The Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri says the following

In a fractured age, when cynicism is God, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly- in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.
(as cited in King, 2003, p. 152)

I want students to be aware of the power of the stories they are living in and by. The story I live by as a teacher is a story of hope and a story of fear and frustration. The following poetic representation captures these thoughts:

To teach

To teach is to hope

To teach is a leap of faith

To teach is to invest in the future

To teach is to cry in frustration

To teach is to exult in our student's successes

To teach is to weep in sorrow

To teach is to nurture

To teach is to guide

To teach is to measure

To teach is to judge

To teach is to evaluate

To teach is to wield a frightening power

Purpose

Through this thesis, I have embarked on a journey to discover *my* self and the self of my students – past, present and future. I have sought, in particular, to understand the meaning of measuring and being measured in school contexts through a storying of my experiences as a successful student and as a struggling teacher, and through the storying of the experiences of students who were *not* successful in school. As a successful student, I had little awareness of the unsuccessful students who inhabited the same classrooms as me. As a struggling teacher, I

became intensely aware of the impact of my evaluations and judgments on unsuccessful students, but had little knowledge of what that impact might have been. I sought out adult students who had experienced failure in school to help me to explore the meaning of evaluation for unsuccessful students.

Although my initial intention was to explore and begin to understand the experiences of students who were the least like me, I have discovered that there are elements of assessment and evaluation that connect us all. I have also learned that reflection on the experiences of others is a lens through which *my* self has been revealed. The central questions of this inquiry have been:

Research questions

- How do narratives shared by Adult Basic Education students help us to understand the complex nature of the relationship between evaluative assessment experiences, identity/subjectivity formation, and discourses of schooling, success, reporting and achievement?
- How can my understanding of the meaning of measurement and evaluation in school contexts be enriched by an exploration of my own narratives of school experience and those of 'unsuccessful' students?

Background

I first became a student in 1967 at the age of five. I enjoyed a pretty successful school career from Kindergarten all the way to Grade 12. For most of those years, I loved being a student. In the years since high school, I have been in and out of post-secondary education several times. I still love being a student. My favourite moments in learning are when I take hold

of a powerful new idea and creativity begins to flow. I am child-like in my excitement over learning. I'm enthusiastic and energized and inspired by challenges.

I didn't decide to become a classroom teacher right away. It wasn't until I was already a parent of three children and in my late twenties that I started to teach because of a late realization that I wanted to rekindle my enthusiasm for learning and learn to kindle it in others. After several years of teaching I became a teacher educator - possibly because of a desire to rekindle my enthusiasm for teaching.

There are many things about teaching that I love. My favourite moments are when the whole class is abuzz with excitement over the consideration of a novel idea. The most enriching aspect of teaching for me is the relationships I form with my students. I have always strived to be more of a facilitator of discovery than a conveyer of knowledge and have experienced a great deal of satisfaction in my teaching. In the midst of this I have been troubled. I have never been able to reconcile my role as supporter and 'coach' for my students with the role of 'judge' I am forced to play at report card time and term end year after year. The question that has guided my practice from the very beginning is, "How can I *do* evaluation – mark assignments, decide on grades, and write report cards - without damaging my students?"

This question drove me to seek out many professional development opportunities in my early years of teaching. In the late 1990's, I learned about an emerging shift in educational theory that has helped educators begin to define a separation between classroom-embedded assessment and traditional evaluation and reporting processes.

Assessment has begun to be recognized as an integral part of the process of teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a). It is a process that is embedded in teaching practice. It takes place during teaching as well as before and after, and is often indistinguishable from teaching

and learning. Through descriptive feedback, assessment informs teachers and learners about next steps in the learning process.

Evaluation, I learned, is a separate process of gathering summative data in order to make determinations about the level to which students have achieved certain learning outcomes. This information is most often presented in symbolic terms such as letter grades, numerical scores and percentages then communicated to parties outside the classroom, such as parents and administrators.

As a result of this professional learning, I began to expand my repertoire of assessment strategies which I hoped would ease my discomfort with the processes of evaluation. The separation of assessment from evaluation offered me a broader space to think about the differences between these processes and what their purposes are.

After 10 years of teaching, I moved to an alternative/home school teaching environment, where I was not required to communicate evaluatively with my students. Although I still wrote report cards to fulfil School District and Ministry of Education reporting requirements, I was never required to deliver the report cards to the students themselves, and most of the parents I worked with preferred not to receive such information. The families didn't *believe* in report cards and grades and I was confronted with perspectives that challenged my assumptions about the role of evaluation and grading in teaching and learning. This arrangement allowed me the freedom to remove evaluation from my relationships with students and to focus on supporting, rather than measuring, their learning. When students presented products of their learning to me, I was freed from the responsibility of determining the numerical or symbolic value of the work and was able to respond authentically to their ideas and their creativity and their enthusiasm. The most insightful thing I discovered during this time was that the richest, most powerful learning was the

hardest to quantify and apply symbols to. Many of these students were reluctant to write and were highly resistant to worksheets of any sort, but they loved to create radio dramas and invent games and build things and make films and sing and dance and grow gardens and make pottery. When it came time to try and ‘sum up’ their learning and turn it into the grades I was required to enter onto report cards, none of my traditional strategies were available to me. How could I possibly assign a 9/10 to a garden or a radio play? I learned to view products of learning qualitatively and to focus on celebrating my students’ achievements rather than attempting to determine the value of them. I often say that my time at that school ‘turned my teaching on its head’ because of the catalyst it provided to reframing my thinking around education.

This move to an alternative teaching environment coincided with my entry into graduate school; suddenly, I was a student again, and back in the ‘competing for marks’ game. The ideas I encountered through reading, research and coursework combined with the powerful emotions I was experiencing as a student who was once again the object of my teachers’ evaluation processes. This experience was another catalyst for an examination of my core beliefs about teaching and learning and relationships in educational settings; I entered into the doctoral phase of my education with a determination to understand more about the experiences of students as they are measured and evaluated.

I began with an exploration of my own experiences as a means of ‘digging into’ the meaning and impact of evaluation on me. What emerged from this process was a series of evaluation ‘moments’ expressed as autoethnographic narratives of experience. These narratives helped me to understand how deeply meaningful these moments of being evaluated and judged by others were for me. I began to share these narratives. I presented them at conferences, workshopped them with colleagues and shared them with my many teacher education students. In

each instance, I was astounded at the storied responses that were evoked by my personal stories. It seemed that everyone had a story to tell about their evaluation experiences in school.

As I gathered more and more stories from my teacher education students, teacher colleagues, and my peers, I discovered that these narratives reveal that as children we are ‘marked’ by evaluation processes in deeply significant ways. These school experiences live powerfully within us throughout subsequent stages of our lives; as we leave K-12 schooling and move on to post-secondary education and /or careers and lives as adults in society we continue to be powerfully influenced by messages about our abilities and about our relative worth that we received in school. Thus began my determination to gather these stories more systematically, and to intensely analyse the experiences they contained in order to enhance my understanding of the impact of evaluation moments on what we come to believe about ourselves.

I attended a session at an academic conference that was related to the experiences of marginalized students in public school systems and suddenly became aware of the privileged perspectives I had been working within as I gathered and thought about my students’ stories. My students, as members of the post-secondary educational community, came predominantly from a history of successful school experience. I am charged with the responsibility of preparing them to teach and assess and evaluate *all* students, including those who struggle in school, yet I was developing an understanding of the experiences of ‘successful’ students only. I began to think about the anxiety I felt every school year at report card time or term end. My angst is the most severe when I have to deal with ‘failing’ students. It’s easy to record good marks on summative reports – it’s the failing students that haunt me. I made a decision to shift the focus of my inquiry toward the experiences of students who have been unsuccessful in school. I found a group of

students who had returned to school as adults after experiencing failure in their early school years and asked if they would be willing to help me to understand their experiences.

They shared their stories with me, and helped me to understand the meaning they make of their experiences. They took a great risk, and opened their hearts and minds to the possibility that they could make sense of their own experiences and make a difference for other students like them. Their hope is that by sharing their stories I will help to ensure that my students, as future teachers, will have a greater understanding of how it feels to be measured and to fail. Their stories challenge some of the absolutes of the Western school experience, such as the measurement and evaluation of students, in the manner that worthwhile stories tend to do.

Like all worthwhile stories, they are, as Foucault (1977) said “gestures fraught with risks” insofar as they challenge absolutes considered sacred and beyond interrogation. Good stories can thus offer radical alternatives for thinking about the world and acting within it” (as cited in Barone, 2000, p.128).

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Defining self, narrative and experience

“The truth about stories is, that that’s all we are”
(King, 2003, p. 2).

I have been exploring the meaning of measurement and evaluation experience in school through a lens of narrative social constructivism which incorporates postmodern conceptions of identity and experience, constructivist theories of learning, a fascination with the notion of life-as-story and poststructuralist perspectives on the social realities reflected and produced through language. A consideration of narratives of experience from within this perspective leads me to conceptualize the notion of ‘experience’ and that of ‘self’ as aspects of life-narrative construction. *Self* and *story* become synonymous terms, and life assertion becomes an aspect of the story of the self.

Self

The notion of *self* that predominates in Western society and reflects a positivist/modernist ideology is traditionally referred to as *identity*. The modernist understanding is that at the core of each of us is our identity; the essence of our being which is unique, fixed and coherent, and makes us what and who we are (B. Davies, 1993). From this perspective, each individual can be seen as “an existential isolate who arrives at a static self-identity” (Barone, 2000, p.123). The conception of identity that resides in this discourse allows us to separate the self from its surroundings, to overlook its contextuality, and to see it as something to be found

rather than constructed. From this perspective “the life story is seen as the individual construction of the autonomous self” (Goodson, 1998, p.5).

A postmodern and constructivist theoretical framework compels me to describe *self* as complex, evolving, diverse, dynamic, and socially constructed. A ‘sense of self’ becomes a fluid concept – an idea, a process, or an evolution. B. Davies (1993) describes the self as “precarious, contradictory, in process, constantly being reconstituted ... each time we think or speak” (p. 33). Barone (2000) extends this notion by summarizing self as conceptualized by George Herbert Mead, as “neither a material substance nor a spiritual soul, but [is] an *idea* that is constructed by a conscious human organism” (p.123).

Self as story

Who we are, and who we are becoming, is a continually evolving process of meaning making that becomes tangible through the stories that we tell. The very act of living is a story, “... the narrative that is written as a human being constructs herself through action is the story of the self” (Barone, 2000, p.123). Interactions and experiences can be seen as the elements of a narrative of the self - a continually unfolding story - one that can never be fully told (ibid). Ivor Goodson (1998) tells us that “in a postmodern world, self becomes a reflexive project, an ongoing narrative project” (p. 4). It is also possible to think of the events of our lives as elements of narratives of the self (Barone, 2000) or of storying the self (Sumara & Davis, 1998). According to Bruner (2004), life itself can be seen as a similar kind of a construction of the human imagination as narrative. These narratives of self are characterized by a weaving and knitting together of self and other that are inevitable when one is a self in relation.

Self in relation / the reflected self

When exploring the impact of evaluative experiences in school, I must inevitably consider the way that these impacts resonate beyond the self of the student as an existential isolate. I defer again to Barone (2000), who describes the self as “an *achievement*, gained and modified through a process of moving upon and experiencing a world in which others are simultaneously achieving their own identities” (p.124). Self is not ‘I’, it is a relational concept; ‘I’ becomes “who-I-am-as-one-who-acts-in-relation-to-others-in-the-world” (p.123).

As each of us integrates experiences into our narratives of self, we see ourselves reflected back to us by others through their actions and reactions to us. A process of ‘coming to know’ about our experiences and our selves is inseparable from our social and cultural context – it “...occurs amid our relationships with others and among the artefacts that are deposited about us in the form of a cultural world” (Sumara & Davis, 1998, p.79). Thus reflecting on experience and a consideration of the impact of experience on the self is also a consideration of others, of culture, and of artefacts that represent experience. This blending of self assertion and social response blurs the boundaries between self and other. “What is considered individual and what is considered communal cannot be caught within fixed, immutable categories, but unfolds through the continual fusing of perceptions, understandings, and interpretations”(p.78).

Discourse - Self construction through language

Another perspective that adds texture to the interpretation of self is one that acknowledges the role of language in the reflection and construction of social worlds. As I considered the notion of self as story, and the becoming of the self as a continually evolving process of meaning making that becomes tangible through the stories that we tell, I felt the need to uncover methods of closely examining the tangible aspect of these stories, which are the actual

words that we use as we narrate ourselves. This ‘storying’ is an innately social process, and the language that we use as we tell our stories reflects our social worlds. My interest in the meaning of evaluative interactions within the social world of the classroom as revealed through our stories led me to a consideration of language as discourse and a consideration of the construction of self that is revealed through language.

Theorists with an interest in language as a social practice refer to the ways in which we interact through language as *discourses* (B. Davies, 1993; Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1977; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Kress, 1985). The term discourse is difficult to attribute a singular definition to, as it has been utilized in many different ways and from many different perspectives. The origin of the word *discourse* comes from the Latin *discursus* - a running to and fro. From these origins – a ‘running to and fro’, it has come to mean a written or spoken communication or debate, or a formal discussion of a topic (“discourse,” 2005).

Theorists such as Fairclough (1992) and Gee (1999, 2004) have expanded the notion of ‘discourse as communication’ to incorporate an acknowledgment of the ideologies inherent in the ways we communicate. From this perspective, language that on the surface appears to be a simple communication – a ‘to and fro’ of ideas, also represents values systems, ideologies, cultural effects and power relations. Rogers (2004) helps to clarify this concept by referring to language use as a social practice: “there are the ‘bits’ of language (words, phrases etc) but there are also the identities and meanings that go along with such ways of speaking” (p. 5). A close examination of the language we use in various situations can help us to identify these identities and meanings and reflect upon the social realities that they reveal. The connection of language to self becomes more clear when we consider that we are ‘spoken into being’ through the discourses that surround us in a cultural world. According to B. Davies (1993), “each child must

locate and take up as their own, narratives of themselves that knit together the details of their existence. At the same time they must learn to be coherent members of others' narratives" (p.22). It is through the discursive practice of storying – the stories we hear about 'who we are' from others and the stories we tell through our interactions - that we learn to read and interpret the landscape of the social world, that we constitute ourselves and each other as beings with specificity. Through these discursive processes we learn our position within various social worlds - we learn to interpret patterns of power and powerlessness within them. Discourse analysts such as Rogers (2004) use the term 'situated identity' to refer to notions of self. This is an acknowledgment of the influence of environments to construct us as selves in different ways. Of particular interest to this study is an examination of the situated identity that is created through membership in the institution of school, and the particular discursive practices within school that influence our sense of self and what we understand about success and failure.

The discursive practices that occur in schools are made evident through "systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution" (Kress, 1985, p. 6). An institution such as a school uses sets of statements and shared meanings that convey messages to its members "that crucially involve a set of values and viewpoints about the relationships between people and the distribution of social goods, at the very least, about who is an insider and who is not, often who is "normal" and who is not, and often, too, many other things as well" (Gee, 1999, p.161). This interpretation of the notion of discourse is referred to by Gee as capital 'D' Discourse, which implies an examination of language that goes beyond the 'bits' of our ways of speaking to incorporate conceptions of values and power that are expressed by using language in particular ways. This is how I will be using the term Discourse in this work.

Within this dissertation, a consideration of Discourses is used as a lens through which to examine the ways in which the language within the narratives reveals implicit and explicit evaluative messages. It is useful in the context of this study to consider the language of evaluative assessment practices and the grades that are entered into report cards as representations of statements and shared meanings that are conveyed to students and powerfully influence the ‘situated identity’ or the ‘story of the self’ that is constructed through their membership in the institution of school.

Literature Review

Clarifying terms: Distinguishing between Assessment and Evaluation

The process of summarizing and communicating about student achievement has been a part of public education systems in North America for over 100 years. For most of the 20th century, the term *assessment* has been defined as an index of learning (Earl & Katz, 2006) and as “a communicative device between the work of education and that of the wider society” (Broadfoot & Black, 2004, p.9). For most of this time, the word *assessment* has been conceptualized and actualized as a process of evaluating and reporting through which teachers attribute value to student learning and report that value to parents and administrators. It is often used as an ‘umbrella’ term to describe all of the processes that teachers use to determine the extent to which students have attained learning objectives.

While in some jurisdictions the word *assessment* is used as an umbrella term that describes assessment and evaluation processes, recent developments in education, politically and theoretically, have led many educators such as me to define a separation between the terms *assessment* and *evaluation*. Assessment has begun to be recognized as embedded in the processes

of teaching and learning. It is also commonly referred to as formative assessment or assessment *for* learning. In contrast, *evaluation* is generally defined as a process of attributing value to products of learning *after* the learning has occurred. Evaluation processes tend to use numbers and symbols in order to communicate information about student achievement. Many practitioners and researchers also refer to this as summative assessment or assessment *of* learning. I view assessment and evaluation processes as quite distinct from each other and will use the terms accordingly throughout this work where possible.

The Assessment Debate

In public education systems, teachers are required to communicate about student performance to parents and administrators as part of their mandated responsibilities. In order to do that, they are required to evaluate, or assign a value to, the student learning that they interpret to have occurred in their classrooms. Standardized report cards inscribed with letter grades and numerical scores were introduced to facilitate this communication over 100 years ago and continue to be the most predominant method of conveying information about student achievement (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; O'Connor, 2007).

The variety of perspectives related to assessment and to the evaluation, grading and reporting of student achievement has been presented by some as an assessment debate and by others as an assessment crisis (Janesick, 2001; Stiggins, 2001, 2002). Whatever the perspective, the current issues are vastly complex (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Crooks, 1988). I have come to associate these issues with two sides of a paradigmatic debate between positivist and constructivist beliefs about learning, truth and knowledge. The utility of conceptualizing a positivist/constructivist dichotomy around assessment is that student learning, and the evaluation

of student learning, mean entirely different things when considered from a positivist or a constructivist perspective.

In general, positivist assessment practices are predominantly *summative, objective* and *evaluative*. Positivist assessment practice is rooted in traditional epistemologies that originated in the early work of Descartes (Guba, 1990; Paulson & Paulson, 1994), and in a persistent societal belief in modernism, scientific measurement, social efficiency theory and behaviourism (Earl, 2003; Shepard, 2000). In simple terms, positivist conceptions of learning view knowledge as an objective reality that is external to the learner. Curriculum is perceived as a body of knowledge, which is to be transmitted from teachers to students. Evaluation then entails determining how much of the body of knowledge the student is able to express or demonstrate in particular ways at the end of a unit of study. This is most commonly accomplished through the use of formal and objective tests and quizzes (published by textbook companies or teacher-made), teacher ‘marking’ against normed standards, or externally constructed and/or administered standardized tests. The ‘how much’ of learning is determined by the teacher, or whoever marks the tests, and is most often expressed in symbolic terms such as a number, a percentage, or a letter grade. This process is often called evaluation because it symbolically attributes a value to a level of achievement attained. The results are used to inform students and teachers about levels of performance, to inform parents and administrators about student achievement, and to calculate student performance for the purposes of fulfilling accountability commitments and reporting on school effectiveness. Knowledge about the amount and the value of student learning is considered to exist within the teacher and is delivered to the students. One of the most pervasive features of positivist assessment practice is the use of numbers and letter grades to attribute a value to student work with little or no accompanying feedback.

Constructivist assessment practices tend to be *formative* (process-oriented) *contextualized*, and *individualized*. Constructivist conceptions of learning do not accept that knowledge is external to the learner – the assumption is that there are multiple constructions of reality. Learning is seen as a process of personal meaning making and social construction, dependent upon complex variables such as the learner’s emotional state, sense of self-efficacy, past experiences, classroom environment and cultural perspective (Gipps, 1999; Shepard, 2000). From within this perspective, assessment is viewed as a part of the process of learning rather than a means of evaluating primarily end products. Constructivist assessment relies on diverse methods which attempt to reflect the complexity and range of each person’s learning such as portfolios of student work, performance assessments, peer feedback and self-reflection. The most common form of constructivist assessment is written or oral descriptive feedback. This feedback can be provided by teachers or peers in the classroom, or extended beyond the classroom to include family members or other interested parties. There is a significant emphasis on self-assessment and the development of metacognition within constructivist-oriented classrooms. Knowledge about the amount and the value of student learning is understood to be a shared construction of understanding between students and teachers. The results of constructivist assessments are most often used to inform teachers about how to proceed with instructional plans and to inform students about their progress toward learning goals.

In the research literature, traces of opposition to strictly summative positivist assessment practices can be found in the early theorizing of philosophers such as Dewey (1916) and Mead in the 1930’s and 40’s (Barone, 2000). In 1967, Scriven first articulated the differences between the terms ‘formative’ and ‘summative’ in educational research to distinguish between final, evaluative perspectives and process-oriented, developmental perspectives on curriculum

evaluation (Roos & Hamilton, 2005; Taras, 2005). In 1971, Bloom, Hastings and Madaus introduced the notion of formative and summative evaluation as a part of student learning (Earl, 2003; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). In the 1980's, Crooks (1988) and Natriello (1987) conducted comprehensive reviews of research literature that examined the impacts of assessment and evaluation practices on student learning and motivation. Wiggins is often acknowledged as the researcher who coined the term 'authentic assessment' in 1989 as he argued against the superficial and artificial nature of standardized tests in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Roos & Hamilton, 2005; Wiggins, 1989). Black and Wiliam (1998b) launched the 'assessment debate' into prominence through the publication of *Inside the Black Box* in 1998. This systematic and extensive review of the literature synthesized the results of over 200 studies and concluded that there was clear and, "incontrovertible" (p.12) evidence of the positive impacts of formative assessment on student achievement. In this publication, Black and Wiliam coined the terms assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning to describe the general differences between formative and summative assessment. It proved to be a seminal work as it sparked thousands of books, articles, commentaries and studies into formative assessment practices internationally. Much of the current literature asserts that there is a significant imbalance between assessment *of* learning (summative/ evaluation) and assessment *for* learning (formative/ assessment). One of the complexities of the current situation is that few researchers deny that assessment *of* learning is an essential part of assessment processes, or that policy makers are justified in seeking information about the performance of public education systems. A key assertion made by proponents of formative assessment is that educators traditionally over-emphasize summative assessment in their classrooms. They urge classroom teachers and educational decision-makers to shift their practices towards more formative assessment in order

to enhance student self esteem, motivation and achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Earl, 2003; Earl & Katz, 2006; Shepard, 2000; Stiggins, 2001, 2002, 2007).

In spite of increasingly public debates, and the appearance of assessment reform in Canada and many western nations, assessment practices at the classroom level are largely unchanged from those that have been in use for decades (Earl, 2003; Gipps, 1999). The belief systems of parents, teachers, students and policymakers persistently derive from traditional theories, which, “continue to operate as the default framework affecting and driving current practices and perspectives” (Shepard, 2000, pg. 4). Classroom teachers’ practices continue to be dominated by assessment strategies that are rooted in a modernist/positivist paradigm, that function in a predominantly summative fashion (Brookhart & Bronowicz, 2003) and rely on number or letter grades to communicate student achievement with very little accompanying feedback (Mavromattis, 1997; McMillan, Myran & Workman, 2002). Many teachers express more confidence in externally designed, ‘scientifically sound’ assessments such as the assessments offered by the publishers of their textbooks than in assessment of their own design (Garcia & Pearson, 1994; Guskey, 2007; McMillan et al, 2002; Stiggins, 2001). In spite of increasing attention to assessment in education in recent years, many classroom teachers lack formal and specific training in assessment design or analysis, (Guskey, 2007; Stiggins, 1999) so that when they design their own assessments, they tend to be positivistic and summative in nature, which offer information that contributes to the evaluation *of* learning rather than support *for* learning (Guskey, 2007; McMillan et al., 2002; Shepard, 2000).

Assessment reform toward more constructivist approaches at the classroom level are constantly subverted by the institutional responsibility of teachers to evaluate student work using

standardized tests, and to report on student learning using numbers, percentages and letter grades which are remnants of positivist thinking about teaching and learning. The conflicting processes – constructivist assessment *for* learning and the use of letter grades and percentages to report on assessment *of* learning are in constant opposition to each other - the result being that even when constructivist assessment is implemented in classrooms, the potential benefits are often subsumed by the application of symbols to student work. Letter grades, the most persistent symbols of student evaluation, continue to be the most common means of rating students in Canada (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Ferguson, 2004).

This debate has been further fuelled by increasing pressures towards accountability at the policy level. The emerging body of research in the Western world that points to the potential of formative/constructivist assessment practices to increase student self-efficacy and achievement stands in opposition to an educational environment where assessment is intensely political and steeped in historical precedent (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Earl, 2003; Fleming & Raptis, 2005; Gipps, 1999; Stack, 2006; Volante, 2004). Recent trends indicate that governments around the world have linked educational performance with potential economic growth (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Fleming & Raptis, 2005) and are “using assessment to help determine curriculum, to impose high ‘standards’ of performance and to encourage competition among schools” (Gipps, 1999, p. 363). This has been particularly evident in the United States, where there has been intense interest in the linkages between international competition and school achievement ever since the release of *The Nation at Risk* document in 1983 which referred to poor performance in American schools as equivalent to ‘unilateral educational disarmament’ (Hess & Rotherham, 2007, p. 2). In particular, the No Child Left Behind policy

initiated by the Bush government in 2002 has led to intense reliance upon standardized tests, which are

now used to hold up children and schools for comparison; the scores are used to discriminate rather than diagnose, punish rather than reward. Equally disturbing is the misuse of these tests—and these tests alone—to unjustly hold teachers and schools accountable and then punish those who have not met adequate yearly progress, as deemed by people other than those working with children on a daily basis (e.g., politicians). (Solley, 2007, p.31)

The evaluation of students through standardized tests thus becomes an evaluation of schools and school staffs and a means by which to “officially indicate(s) whether a school should be regarded as successful or unsuccessful” (Popham, 2006, p. 2). These determinations of success or failure at the level of the school lead to various punitive measures that range from reductions in funding to the outright firing of whole school staffs as was widely reported in February, 2010 (Kaye, 2010).

In British Columbia “educational authorities have targeted the improvement of student achievement as the province’s pre-eminent educational objective” (Fleming & Raptis, 2005, p. 173) in recent years. Some would argue that “the collection of data has become in itself a major instrument of social control, whether this is at the level of the individual, the institution or indeed whole operational systems such as that of education” (Broadfoot & Black, 2004, p.19).

Government measures of educational performance are conducted almost exclusively using externally designed standardized tests which are viewed as the most objective way to evaluate quality in public education (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Kohn, 2004; Volante, 2004). Like most other provinces and territories in Canada, British Columbia uses provincial, large-

scale assessment (Duncan & Noonan, 2007) and has made use of such assessments almost continuously since 1876 (Fleming & Raptis, 2005). Ironically, the “legitimacy of these assessment programs derives not from empirical evidence of their probable effectiveness but from the perceptions they evoke and the symbol of order and control they represent” (Gipps, 1999, p. 364). When test scores are distributed through media sources, parents and the general public are inclined to view them as indicators of whether particular schools or educational programs are effective, regardless of the fact that test scores are rarely indicative of the day-to-day workings of classrooms and they disregard cultural and/or socio-economic contexts (Gipps, 1999; Kohn, 2004; Solley, 2007; Stack, 2006). Broadfoot and Black (2004) assert that we have become “an ‘assessment society’ - as wedded to our belief in the power of numbers, grades, targets etc. to deliver quality and accountability, equality and defensibility as we are to modernism itself” (p. 19).

Assessment and evaluation processes are expected to fulfil varied and contradictory purposes. Both assessment and evaluation have a role to play in supporting learning – assessment by supporting student learning through descriptive feedback, and evaluation by providing summative information about learning goals met ‘so far’. Classrooms with a positivist assessment orientation tend to offer primarily summative, evaluative feedback on student work, which does nothing to support future learning efforts (Earl, 2003; Stiggins, 2002)

It is when the roles of assessment and evaluation are conflated, then complicated by the use of number and letter scores, that learning and relationships are compromised. When teachers offer feedback that combines descriptive, supportive comments with number or letter scores, the numbers and letters on student work cause students to pay little or no attention to the feedback offered, thus nullifying the potential benefits of the feedback (Rust, O’Donovan, & Price, 2005).

Classroom teachers stand at the center of conflicting tensions – they are asked to be both coach and judge in their classrooms (Cooper, 2007). They desire to support students in their learning while at the same time they are continually pushed towards merely measuring and evaluating student learning. They struggle to design authentic assessment tasks, yet they are required to report on learning using decontextualized letter and number scores; they hear about the benefits of assessment *for* learning, yet their personal history of schooling and their immersion in modernist thinking reaffirms the ‘rightness’ and the ‘logic’ of positivist assessment practice. Therefore teachers continue to rely upon assessment practices that convey an illusion of scientific precision and accuracy out of a sense of obligation to maintain the ‘status quo’, to protect themselves from criticism and to maintain a sense of stability in their work. As Earl (2003) indicates

Educators find themselves in a difficult position. They are part of the transition, laden down with the burdens of the past, while contemplating the possibilities of the future. They know how it has always been and have a great deal invested in maintaining stability, but at the same time, many of them acknowledge that it just doesn’t feel right.
(p. 12)

This transition is difficult for teachers because they are placed in the position of being the ones responsible for making changes to their assessment practices at the classroom level, while at the same time they are faced with pressures at the district and societal level to show evidence of student improvement through ‘scientifically constructed’ standardized assessments (Solley, 2007). In addition, the shift from positivist to constructivist assessment practice involves much more than simple adjustments to teaching and

assessment strategies. To shift to a constructivist assessment ‘as learning’/formative assessment practice requires

reconceptualizing not just assessment, but teaching and learning as well. Assessment as learning means giving up the more traditional constructs of transmitting knowledge, “managing” classrooms, and maintaining control, and instead redistributing responsibilities in classrooms. This major shift in approach (and consequently in the student-teacher power arrangements) can produce a sense of disequilibrium and dissonance. (Earl & Katz, 2006, p.70)

This disequilibrium and dissonance is being experienced by teachers as they seek to change their assessment practices. They are caught in the midst of tensions between a movement towards formative assessment that reflects constructivist conceptions of teaching and learning and pulls towards positivist assessment practices that are augmented by increasing accountability demands.

Shaping student sense of self through assessment

There is a significant body of research that indicates that all forms of classroom assessment serve to construct student sense of self in powerful ways (Black and Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Cowie, 2005; Crooks, 1988; Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003; Stipek & McIver 1989). Gipps (1999) asserts that “assessment plays a key role in identity formation” (p. 382). In particular, students’ sense of self-efficacy – perception of their capability to perform certain tasks– is shaped by assessment experiences (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Brookhart & DeVoge, 1999; Crooks, 1988; Stiggins, 2007). In some studies, self-efficacy has been shown to be a more powerful predictor of achievement than academic ability (Broadfoot, Weeden & Winter, 2002; Crooks, 1988). A sense of self-efficacy is connected to descriptions of the impacts of assessment

and evaluation practices on student confidence. Repeated exposure to poor evaluations “can lead to a sense of futility - a feeling of hopelessness - that can cause [students] to stop caring and stop trying. For many of them, consistent evidence of poor performance repeatedly reported to their families or to the public can result in a profound and long lasting loss of confidence (Stiggins, 1999). Black et al. (2004) also assert that “assessment feedback often has a negative impact, particularly on low-achieving students, who are led to believe that they lack ‘ability’ and so are not able to learn” (p. 9).

Positivist approaches to assessment have been found to have significantly negative effects on student sense of self as learner, especially among those students who are lower achievers (Harlen, 2004; Harlen & Crick, 2003; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). Most students use the record of their previous assessments to predict how they will perform on future learning tasks. Students who perform well come to expect that they will perform well; students who fail learn to assume that they will continue to fail (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Brookhart & DeVoge, 1999; Crooks, 1988; Stiggins, 2007). Pupils who continually experience failure learn to see themselves as incapable of improving their performance and often give up in helplessness (Broadfoot et al., 2002; Stiggins, 2007). They also tend to avoid challenge, an action motivated by a desire to be seen to do well, and to lack persistence with academic tasks (Black et al, 2004; Broadfoot et al., 2002; Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003; Stiggins, 2002, 2007; Stipek & McIver, 1989).

Students rarely understand what symbolic measures of their achievement mean in terms of their learning (Earl, 2003). At best, they receive information that is of no benefit, as exemplified by a comment included in Mavromattis’ (1997) study of elementary students, “Look, I’ve got a ‘B’ and a comment: ‘Good, but you have to improve’, but I don’t know exactly what I need to do to improve to get an A” (p. 394). At worst, students come to identify

themselves and their relative self-worth with the symbols that are used to describe them (“I’m a 2” or “I’m a C student” for example) (Broadfoot et al. 2002; Reay & Wiliam, 1999; Stipek & McIver, 1989). As a consequence, many students become intensively dependent on teacher approval (Natriello, 1987) rather than possessing an ability to assess the level and value of their learning independently (Black et al., 2004; Harlen, 2004; Harlen & Crick, 2003).

Numerical and letter grade rankings lead to social comparisons of ability, which affects the social construction of sense of self as learner. As Gipps (1999) asserts, “classrooms in which assessments focus on comparison and competition with others can lead to a negative effect in children who compare unfavourably” (p.383). In these settings, children’s evaluations of their abilities and their feelings toward themselves are more negative than in less competitive environments (Gipps, 1999; Mavromattis, 1997).

Although there is a significant body of research that indicates the positive effects of constructivist/assessment for learning approaches on student achievement, there is very little that addresses the question of the impact of these approaches on sense of self as learner or construction of identity. Shepard (2000) indicates that much of the current research on feedback is of limited value in this context because it is often conducted from within a behaviourist frame. Crooks (1988) published an influential review of research comprising over 200 studies related to the impact of various ‘evaluation practices’ on students, which addresses some of the questions around the impact of feedback and mastery approaches to teaching and learning that have some relevance here. In the short term, descriptive feedback appears to help students feel a sense of accomplishment, to influence their perceptions of their capabilities, and to positively influence the development of particular learning strategies (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Crooks, 1988). Sadler (1989) notes that a steady flow of descriptive feedback to students encourages continual

self-assessment. Crooks (1988) also states that when feedback is focused on personal progress in mastering educational tasks, it has a positive effect on self-efficacy and encourages effort.

It is difficult to ignore the inevitability that students themselves will view assessment from a positivist rather than a constructivist perspective. Broadfoot and Black (2004) ask us to consider the possibility that “students may well interpret all assessments as summative, and both devalue and/or resist their involvement in them” (p. 18) until they experience the value of formative assessment and inclusion in assessment processes (Black et al, 2004). When Broadfoot and Black reflect on the large body of research into formative assessment that took place between 1993 and 2003, they conclude that

Assessment can be a powerful force in supporting learning, and a mechanism for individual empowerment. It can help learners at all ages and stages to become more self-aware, more expert in mapping an individual learning path in relation to their own strengths and weaknesses and in facilitating fruitful collaboration with fellow learners. (p. 22)

This suggests that students can learn to view themselves as powerful actors in the development of the stories of self that are constructed in school – they can be encouraged to develop an awareness of their skills and abilities that is not entirely dependent upon the evaluations they receive from teachers.

A narrative social constructivist lens leads me to view this research evidence in terms of the *story* students construct about themselves as they integrate assessment information from teachers and peers with their developing sense of self as learner. A critical theory lens leads me to wonder what social realities are constructed and identities enacted as a result of this information. Students caught up in a repetitive cycle of failure must inevitably construct

themselves as ineffective actors in their own learning (Stiggins, 1999). As Barone (2000) states “assessment strategies that honor the complexity and uniqueness of each student’s life will entail the publication of chapters within student life-stories” (p. 131). In constructivist assessment environments, students can become ‘strong poets’ who “plot their life stories to their own emergent ends and purposes” (p. 125).

Although the research evidence is still emerging, it implies that constructivist methods of assessment that value multiple modes of expression, provide clear feedback and include the voice of the learner allow students to construct a stronger sense of their own capabilities and an increased ability to advocate for themselves as learners (Black et al, 2004).

The role of assessment in student- teacher relationships

Classroom assessment is a key means for initiating and negotiating social relationships between students and teachers (Cowie, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Gipps, 1999). Teachers are challenged by their dual roles as supporter and judge of students. These roles come into tension with each other when grades are assigned to student work (Cooper, 2007; O’Connor, 2002). Positivist approaches to classroom assessment help to create the conditions for a steeply hierarchical relationship between student and teacher (Ecclestone, 2004; Gipps, 1999). The teacher is the expert, the evaluator, and the objective judge of student abilities while the students are the recipients of the teacher’s judgments. Summative/evaluative assessments such as objective tests and quizzes can give the teacher the impression that she ‘knows’ what a student is capable of based on a narrow set of criteria; scores on tests stand for what is in the minds of students (Broadfoot et al., 2002; Genishi, 1997). Students in positivist assessment environments tend to rely on their teachers to direct their learning rather than becoming self-regulating learners (Broadfoot et al., 2002; Gipps, 1999).

In constructivist assessment environments, the assessment relationship between student and teacher has the potential to become one in which power is shared; through assessment for learning, the relationship is opened up to include and recognize the learner's perspective. Genishi (1997) refers to this relationship as one in which both parties work towards 'intersubjectivity' and shared meanings between students and teachers.

The Latin root of the word assessment is 'assidere', to sit beside (A. Davies, 2000). From this perspective, the teacher's approach to student work is more interpretive than evaluative (Gipps, 1999; Shepard, 2000). To Barone (2000), "coming to know the self of a student, therefore, is as much an interpretive process as is coming to know one's own self" (p. 130). In classrooms where learning and assessment are viewed from a constructivist perspective there is "more a feel of teacher as 'facilitator' than 'provider' or 'judge' and more of 'teacher with the child' than 'teacher to the child'" (Gipps, 1999, p.381). Assessment within this frame becomes a collaborative, mutually affirming endeavour, one in which 'power over' is replaced by 'power with' in student-teacher relationships (Gipps, 1999, Hall & Burke, 2003); teachers and students become co-narrators of evolving stories of the learner's journey.

Students and peers

In a positivist assessment environment, evaluations such as grades often fulfil a normative function. Students who are given feedback as symbols are likely to see the symbols as a way to compare themselves with others (Black et al, 2004). When classroom assessment is based on positivist notions of fixed intelligence and inherent ability and a trust in the applicability of the 'bell curve' to classroom environments, competition is inevitable. Whether intentional or not, this approach to assessment creates hierarchies and social rankings within classrooms (Broadfoot et al., 2002; Kohn, 2004; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). Normative grading and

the creation of hierarchies in classrooms results in poorer social relationships between students (Crooks, 1988; Natriello, 1987).

In a constructivist assessment environment, hierarchies tend to level out – there is less emphasis on competition and more emphasis on collaboration. Assessment *for* learning is viewed as a powerful vehicle for redistributing power and deconstructing hierarchical relationships in classrooms (Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003). The provision of clear attainable goals and a consistent use of peer feedback and peer assessment lead students to focus on helping each other improve their work rather than competing with each other (William, 2006). Peer assessment can also help students develop objectivity towards their own work and aid in the development of effective self assessment (Black et al, 2004). When possibilities for varied representations of learning are valued, students are more able to recognize the uniqueness of individuals rather than comparing them based on perceived levels of ability (Black et al, 2004; Gipps, 1999; Shepard, 2000).

When students are able to recognize each other's uniquenesses rather than competing against each other, a community of learners develops that enhances the learning environment for all learners (Brownlie, Feniak, & Schnellert, 2006).

Students and learning

When knowledge is seen as a distinct body of information that can be transmitted to the learner, the student's role is a passive one. Students are expected to receive, record and regurgitate static knowledge. Assessment then entails checking the level to which the information has been received by reviewing end products of student work (Gipps, 1999; Hall & Burke, 2003). When tests pervade the ethos of the classroom, test performance is more highly valued than what is being learned (Harlen & Crick, 2003). In this context, assessment is separate from learning, and separate from the learner. This separation is further amplified by the use of

number and letter grades, which objectify students and their learning. In spite of the fact that schools were designed to provide education to students, for many students the school experience leads to a marked reduction in interest in learning (Crooks, 1988).

The relationship between students and their learning can also be considered in terms of motivation for learning. In a positivist frame “motivation is external and based on positive reinforcement of many small steps” (Shepard, 2000, p. 5). In classrooms with positivist assessment orientations, grades are often used as rewards or punishments – marks for work completed, neatness, effort or behaviour are conflated with marks for learning (Kohn, 2004; O’Connor, 2002; Stiggins, 2001). When this occurs, student’s goal orientation is shifted towards more extrinsic than intrinsic motivation (Brookhart & Bronowicz, 2003; Harlen, 2004; Kohn, 2004). The purpose for participating in educational activities and for completing assignments becomes the mark or the grade rather than the learning (Black et al., 2004; O’Connor, 2002). This extrinsic motivation is particularly evident in high-stakes environments where marks determine or are perceived to determine future possibilities for students (Kohn, 2004; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). Black et al. (2004) assert that the giving of numerical scores and grades on student work actually has a negative effect on student learning.

When we assume that learning is a process of meaning construction and sense making, the learner’s role is an active one (Hall & Burke, 2003; Shepard, 2000). When students are provided with clear criteria for learning tasks, and descriptive feedback related to their progress in relation to individually relevant learning goals, there is a shift in the students’ relationship to learning - they become active learners who can take responsibility for, and manage, their own learning (Black et al., 2004). In school environments where clear criteria and descriptive feedback were implemented, Black et al (2004) report that students became advocates for their

own learning needs. In addition, the researchers were surprised to discover students assuming ownership for their learning beyond the context of the classroom where these opportunities were provided:

One class, which was subsequently taught by a teacher not emphasizing assessment for learning, surprised that teacher by complaining: "Look, we've told you we don't understand this. Why are you going on to the next topic?" While students who are in tune with their learning can create difficulties for teachers, we believe that these are exactly the kinds of problems we should want to have. (p. 20)

When students 'own' their learning, an intrinsic goal motivation takes over, and students become genuinely interested in learning-related goals rather than grade-motivated goals (Black et al, 2004; Broadfoot et al., 2002). Constructivist assessment approaches assume that learners may not demonstrate their understanding in uniform ways – this opens up possibilities for students to tap into their creativity and to engage the imagination when considering ideas and constructing meaning (Greene, 1994). Assessment becomes an interpretive act – an art more than a science, and a part of learning, not separate from it (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Eisner, 1976; Gipps, 1999). Students who are recognized as active meaning-makers and collaborators in the process of deciding 'next steps' in their learning journey are invited to take responsibility for their learning while teachers act as facilitators who create conditions for growth among their students.

In summary, many researchers point to the powerful impact of assessment and evaluation processes on students' sense of self and on their self efficacy. There is significant evidence in the research literature that recommends a shift in focus from positivistic, solely summative assessment practice (evaluation) towards a balance of formative and summative assessment that

involves learners in assessment processes. Significant achievement gains are being realized in classrooms that clearly separate assessment and evaluation processes, that honour the complexity of learning as an individualized constructive process of meaning-making and that embed support for student learning in day by day, minute by minute instructional practice. This shift in focus has the potential to enhance the educational experience for students and to allow them to become full participants in their own education, as powerful actors in ‘power with’ rather than ‘power under’ relationships with their teachers. In short, as Gipps (1999) asserts, “constructivism symbolizes emancipation” (p. 372).

Report Cards: History and cultural context

We all know that school is the place we go to learn our ABC’s and our 123’s. What we also learn is that A’s, B’s and C’s and 1’s, 2’s and 3’s represent much more than systems of symbols with which to communicate; as symbols of the power relations implicit in classrooms, they produce a reality in which students are normalized, stigmatized and placed in hierarchies. They are the markers of our achievements, they are the symbols by which we come to interpret our value as intelligent and capable or ignorant and incapable and they are the symbols by which we determine our relative worth.

The practice of assigning letter grades to student achievement and using the report card to communicate the grades is so widespread and pervasive in Western societies that it is rarely questioned even though it is a practice that many teachers are uncomfortable with (Stiggins, 1999; Stiggins, 2007; Earl, 2003). Although questions are beginning to be raised about the inconsistency of teachers’ grading practices (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000; Reeves, 2007; O’Connor, 2007), very few educational writers insist upon a rethinking of the use of

grades themselves (Fussell, 2007; Kohn, 1993, 2004). They continue to be used throughout public school systems from Grade 1 through to the PhD level. Letter grades are feared and resented by the students who receive them, uneasily applied by those who assign them and accepted as ‘the way things are’ by almost everyone. What is as pervasive as the use of letter grades is a distinct dis-ease about them on both sides of the practice – that of giving and that of receiving grades.

In Canada and the United States, the occasion of receiving a report card is a shared student experience that evokes powerful memories, yet the experience is rarely questioned as being anything but ‘normal’. A report card is just a piece of paper - an official, standardized document that contains letter grades, numerical scores and written comments intended to communicate student achievement to parents, but it represents much more than that. A report card represents societal expectations of the scientific accuracy of teachers’ measurements of student learning. It reflects a commitment to ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’. It communicates the extent to which each student ‘succeeds’ in the school system. The grades inside the report card are symbols that summarize student achievement over a period of time, yet they have also come to represent much more than student achievement. Report cards and grades have become cultural icons that represent complex sets of shared meanings – we think of ourselves as having an ‘A’ when we do something well, an ‘F’ when we do not. ‘A’ represents excellence, ‘C’ represents mediocrity and ‘F’ represents failure in a vast range of contexts that have nothing to do with school. For example, a personal friend recently asked me to review a book that she had published. After I gave her some honest feedback, she said to me, “I just had to feel I could give myself an ‘A’ on this.” This is a woman more than 30 years beyond her high school education

and a successful author, yet she was still moved to express the value of her published work in terms of a letter grade.

Report cards and the grades inside them have a history that is consistent with the history of modern public education systems in North America. Modern grading and reporting practices are commonly recognized to have begun in the late 1800's, when teachers began to determine and report anecdotally upon whether a student was ready to progress from one stage to the next in school by writing an informal report or by visiting families in their homes (Gronlund, 2003; Guskey, 1994). According to Durm (1993), letter grades first appeared at Mount Holyoke College (US) in 1897. The grades that were introduced then represented percentage levels connected to student achievement that are strikingly similar to those in use today.

In the early 1900's, the numbers of students attending public school increased dramatically. In order to cope with their increasing workload, high school teachers introduced percentages as a systematic and mathematical method of reporting on student achievement. In 1912-13, researchers Starch and Elliot conducted a study into this practice, which revealed wide variations in the means by which teachers determined these percentages (Guskey, 1994). Their report led schools to create grading systems that utilized fewer and larger categories such as an *Excellent, Average* and *Poor* 3-point scale and a 5-point A, B, C, D and F scale – a system which was designed to better recognize the subjective nature of assessment by providing symbols that represented ranges of achievement rather than precise numerical scores such as percentages (Guskey, 1994). The introduction of intelligence testing in the United States in the 1930's had the impact of creating a system of 'grading on the curve' based on the notion that scores on innate intelligence tests imitate a predictable pattern of 'normal' distribution along a bell curve. Belief in the scientific reliability and objectivity of bell curve distribution led to a widely held belief

that letter grades in classrooms should predictably follow this pattern - in some cases leading to advocacy for schools to specify a precise percentage of students who would achieve each grade (Gronlund, 2006; Guskey, 1994). Movements to de-emphasize grades have come and gone over the interceding years, but letter grades have persisted in a form strikingly similar to those introduced over 100 years ago, and continue to be the most common means of reporting on student achievement in Canada and the United States (Ferguson, 2004; Marzano & Kendall, 1997; O'Connor, 2002).

In addition to their persistence within education systems, letter grades are used as symbols to communicate the quality of items such as eggs, coins, orange juice and animal carcasses. The report card, which was originally designed to standardize communication about learning and achievement to students and parents, has become a cultural icon, perceived by many as imbued with the power to communicate objective and reliable measures of many different programs and institutions. In educational contexts, report cards have moved outside of the classroom to local and national levels. In 1969, the United States began to publish *The Nation's Report Card*, which reports on a sampling of school effectiveness throughout the country. In Canada, the Fraser Institute began publishing a *Report Card on Schools* in British Columbia in 1998, a publication that had expanded to include 5 provinces by 2007 (Cowley, 2007).

The Fraser Institute's stated philosophy is that, "What gets measured can be improved" (Cowley, 2007). This philosophy appears to be endemic, as report cards are now created to communicate performance in a vast array of contexts and are viewed as powerful tools of accountability and program improvement. For example, there is the Report Card on Health Care, the Report Card on the Environment, the Shoreline Habitat Report Card, the Video Game Report Card, the Clean Hands Report Card and the Report Card on the War in Iraq. I recently

‘Googled™’ the term *Report Card* and was startled to discover that the search revealed over 162,000,000 results. Part of the reason for the proliferation of grades and report cards in North American society is that, “grades or numbers, like all symbols, offer efficient ways of summarizing”(Wiggins, 1994, p. 142).

Grades appear to offer society a common language to communicate quality in a clear objective manner in a variety of contexts, yet in their initial context, that of education, grading is nothing like an exact science. Teacher’s grading practices are far from objective and represent a ‘hodgepodge’ of assessment practices (Brookhart, 1993), offer “spurious precision, a subjective rating masquerading as an objective assessment” (Kohn, 1993, p. 201) and have been described as “so imprecise that they are almost meaningless” (Marzano, 2000, p. 1). Guskey and Bailey (2001) and Marzano (2000) have reviewed and synthesized decades of research into school grading practices and report that despite the illusion of uniform assessment practices implied by the common ‘language’ of grades, these practices vary greatly from school to school, and even within schools (Duncan and Noonan, 2007; Reeves, 2008). In spite of this imprecision and inconsistency, and the view that much current practice in grading and reporting is “shamefully inadequate” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 1) societal belief in grades appears to be stronger than ever before (Broadfoot & Black, 2004). According to Guskey & Marzano (2001), standards, assessment, accountability and grading have become the centre of every modern education reform effort. Some researchers assert that school has come to be about the grades rather than the learning to the extent that letter grades have acquired an almost cult-like importance in American schools (Olson, 1995, as cited in O’Connor, 2002).

Chapter 3: Research methodology

Theoretical framework for my approach to research

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. " 'You can't understand the world without telling a story,' the Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor tells us. 'There isn't any center to the world but a story'" (King, 2003, p. 32). I have come to agree with Tom King and Gerald Vizenor. You really can't understand the world without telling a story.

My stated interpretation of self as dynamic, relational and narrative, and of life events as iterations of life-as-story leads naturally to narrative, or storied, forms of research, interpretation and representation. Implicit in my epistemology is a theoretical framing of self as story, life assertion as narrative construct, and a belief in the power of story to make sense of experience. This has led me to develop a research design that allows me to incorporate these perspectives with a focus on the ways that the stories we tell of our experiences and the ways we use language to tell them reflect and construct particular social worlds.

I have come to see this as a layered and multi-faceted narrative approach. At the core is a belief in story as an epistemology – a way to make meaning of our experiences. This core is overlaid with a belief in the potential of autoethnography. This perspective leads me to assert that a telling and examination of my own stories is an effective means of increasing my understanding of my experiences and the experiences of others, and the cultural contexts these experiences emerged from. An understanding of the social aspects of the construction of experience compels me to examine the 'we' that is implicit in 'me' and to be curious about the meaning others make from their experiences as well. This examination is facilitated through co-autoethnography (working with others to create a storying of their experiences) and narrative

analysis (examining the impact of the stories we tell and are told by others about who we are). I then delve more deeply into the stories themselves by examining the use of language within them, a process that utilizes aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis. This approach involves looking closely at the language and Discourses represented within stories to develop an understanding of how the stories in whole, and the words within them, reflect and construct particular social worlds. Tom King also tells us that “it was Sir Isaac Newton who said, ‘To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction.’ Had he been a writer, he might have simply said, ‘To every action there is a story’”(2003, p. 29).

Narrative as research method

The most defining feature of narrative inquiry is that it is the study of experience as it is lived (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). From the perspective of a narrative researcher “story is one if not *the* fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). Bruner (2004) asserts that “we seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative” (p. 692). Sharing of stories is a common yet deeply meaningful way to share past experiences and to make meaning of them. As Kramp (2004) tells us, “narrative reveals to us how the persons we are studying construct themselves as the central characters and narrators of their own stories...participants are actors in the story who develop as a person, becoming in turn, a self” (p. 112). If my intention is to seek to understand the meaning that people make of their evaluative assessment experiences, I assert that stories are the best evidence I can obtain. As Polkinghorne (2007) describes it, “the storied descriptions people give about the meaning they attribute to life events is, I believe, the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people’s experience” (p. 480).

The researcher can either study lived experience as a storied phenomenon – representing an analysis of experience in narrative form, or study the stories people tell about their experiences and analyze them for common themes, metaphors and plotlines. In this way, narrative is both a method and phenomena of study (Clandinin, 2007). As a method, narrative inquiry allows me to indulge my fascination with story and the meanings that stories convey. Stories are deeply meaningful to us as human beings. The stories that come to mind when we are asked to recall experiences from our distant past stand out as representative of significant events in our lives – the minutiae of daily living are forgotten – yet experiences that have meaning live *in* us and become stories. “Experienced meaning is not simply a surface phenomenon; it permeates through the body and psyche of participants” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 482), and can be shared with others through our stories.

As a phenomenon, the stories that we relate can be viewed as our ‘narratives of self’ and the stories that emerge from our telling are much more than stories, they are ‘all we are’ as King (2003) would say. As I would say, we become stories; stories become us.

Autoethnography

Narrative inquiry asks that researchers become autobiographically conscious of their own reactions to their work (Clandinin, 2000). Ellis and Bochner (2000) extend this notion by asking us to consider how researchers’ own lives can be made into a story worth telling. This methodology, one of constructing and examining texts based on personal experience has been utilized in social sciences research in many ways such as autobiography, narratives of the self and personal narratives. A methodology that has emerged from the use of personal narratives is autoethnography. Autoethnography combines the use of personal narrative with an examination

of the cultural milieu from which the narratives emerge. Richardson (1994) defines it as “an evocative form of writing that produces highly personalized and revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences” (p. 521). Ellis & Bochner (2000) describe it as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p.742).

Autoethnography allows the researcher to delve into, and then express, the embodiment and the affective consequences of experience, then to extend the analysis of the experience to the self “lived in a cultural context” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). Through autoethnography, my intention is to come to a deeper understanding of my evaluative school experiences at a personal level, but also to explore the cultural implications of these experiences as they occurred within the context of the culture particular to the institution of the school as it is broadly experienced in Western society. As Ellis (1999) has explained, “by exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life” (p. 671) as experienced within schools and classrooms.

When we tell our own stories, the question often arises as to whether they are ‘true’ or ‘accurate’. Can we describe our own stories as completely accurate? Consider the familiar scenario of a family gathering where siblings compete to tell various versions of the same event. As most of us have experienced, even stories of the same experience differ from teller to teller. One may ask, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) did

Do stories run the risk of distorting the past? Of course – stories rearrange, redescribe, invent, omit and revise – the story is not a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of one’s life; it does not seek to recover already constituted meanings. The question is not, ‘Does my story reflect my past accurately?’ as if I were holding a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, ‘what are the consequences my story

produces? What kind of a person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life? (p. 745)

Why do I interpret the past in the ways that I do? I wondered. Will the telling of my stories help me to consider new ways of thinking about my experiences? Regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of the stories that emerge, the possibilities that autoethnography afford me are the opportunity to share and make meaning of my own experiences and to consider them in relation to the experiences of others. As Davies and Gannon tell us, “In this work it is assumed that the detail of how the researcher is discursively constituted will give insights into how the researcher, like others, is made human in particular ways through their engagement in the social world” (2006, p.3). The process of writing and deeply reflecting upon my own experiences has the potential to help me to understand the tensions of ‘being’ in the institution of school-as-culture, as student and as teacher.

One of the fascinating things about stories is that they are innately relational. The story and the storyteller require an audience. Each of us is “one-who-acts-in-relation-to-others-in-the-world” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p.251) by default. Our experiences, and the stories that reflect them, do not occur in a social vacuum, they emerge from the ethnos of our construction within a social milieu. As such, they become “a revelation of the social and discursive processes through which we become individuals” (B. Davies et al, 2001, p. 170). Thus a focus on ‘me’ and my experiences has the potential to illuminate the experiences of many – those who are like and unlike me – who inhabited Western classrooms and schools and were subject to similar social and discursive processes.

Co-autoethnography/ collective biography

My interest in the dynamic and relational aspects of self also provokes me to explore methods of research that are collaborative. As much as possible, I sought to involve participants in sharing, discussing and reflecting upon experience in group settings, which reflects my understanding of learning and meaning-making as a social activity. Social and collaborative methods of story-sharing enable us to construct understandings of the world together, which can be referred to as co-autoethnography (Taylor & Coia, 2006a, 2006b).

The processes of collective biography, as described by Davies and Gannon (2006), extend the notion of co-autoethnography. This method involves groups of researchers working on a particular topic, drawing on their own memories, and telling, listening and writing together to “move beyond the clichés and usual explanations to the point where the written memories come as close as they can make them to ‘an embodied sense of what happened’”(p. 3). I choose to view the participants in this study as co-researchers, in that we are all involved in seeking to understand, through our stories, the meaning of our school experiences. The analysis that I undertake *with* the participants is undoubtedly not as detailed and intense as the analysis that takes place in a collective biography research session, but drawing on memories together by telling, listening, responding, writing, and responding to writing is undertaken collaboratively in an attempt to ‘move beyond the clichés and usual explanations’ in developing our understanding. Each insight that is represented in my writing reflects a complex interplay of my own and the participants’ interpretations of experience. The collaborative construction of meaning, overlaid with a sense of the contextuality of experience blends self, others, artefacts and culture in an exploration of the meaning of our experiences, mine and those of the participants, through the stories that we tell.

Judging the research: Narrative truth

Earlier sections of this dissertation discuss positivist and constructivist perceptions of teaching, learning, assessment and evaluation processes (p. 26-45). This discussion has relevance here when I consider the notions of truth and validity in the context of qualitative research methodology. From a positivist perspective, truth is an external concept, concerned with statements that can be supported by empirical facts, while validity is concerned with the extent to which the researcher is able to be objective, neutral, and distanced from the research context (Lather, 1986).

From a constructivist perspective, particularly my sense of narrative social constructivism, the word truth refers more accurately to ‘a truth’ rather than ‘the truth’. I am not seeking factual truth that is waiting to be found in empirical evidence. I seek “a truth in relation to what cannot actually be recovered – the moment as it was lived” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p.3). A ‘truth in relation’ to the moment as it was lived is embodied in the story that is ‘planted’ within us through experience, and becomes tangible when it is transformed into language as we narrate it – as we tell the story. The truth I am seeking is a narrative truth – a truth that is made evident through story – a truth that *is* story.

Qualitative researchers who consider the notion of truth as it resides in texts such as autoethnographies, co-autoethnographies and narratives tend to refer to a ‘sense of truth’ as resident in the notion of verisimilitude (Hopper et al, 2008; Sparkes, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Verisimilitude refers to the extent to which qualitative research texts ‘speak to the truth’ as interpreted by the reader. It places truth in a more relativistic frame, where the construction of meaning is dependent upon interaction between reader and text. It is my hope that each narrative within this dissertation “speaks to truth, [and] creates a verisimilitude for the

phenomenon examined” (Hopper et al, 2008, p.13). It is difficult, then, to lay claims to having ‘discovered’ the ‘truth’ about our evaluative school experiences, yet it is my hope and intention to speak to a larger truth than the incidents within these particular stories. I hope to evoke a response from the readers of these texts that emerges from their ability to connect to the experiences related within the narratives. I intend for readers to view them as authentic and to rethink their perceptions of the impact of evaluative processes on students in classrooms. As Polkinghorne (2007) says, “Narrative researchers undertake their inquiries to have something to say to their readers about the human condition. Their efforts are not simply for their own private consumption” (p. 476). My efforts are more concerned with transforming situations of marginalization and inequality in classrooms than with providing entertaining narratives. In order for this to occur, the narratives must convey the ‘feeling tone’ of life as lived. As Sparkes describes it

This feeling tone is best conveyed when the text itself invites the reader into a vicarious experience (however brief) of the life or lives being described. If this invitation is taken up, then the reader might gain an experience of the lives “in the round” with a range of mood feeling, experience, situational variety, and language. Consequently, the reader can come away from the text with a heightened sensitivity to the life or lives being depicted, and with some flavour of the kinds of events, characters, and social circumstances that circumscribe those lives. (2002, pg. 214)

If the readers of this work take up the invitation to engage with the text and come away with a heightened sensitivity to the meaning of evaluation in school contexts, my hope is that they will not only think differently, but act differently within the realm of their social milieu, and participate in the transformation of education systems.

I also intend for this research to have an impact on the participants, which is referred to as catalytic validity. The notion of catalytic validity “flies directly in the face of the essential positivist tenet of researcher neutrality”, (Lather, 1986, p. 67) by incorporating an intention for transformation of the research participants through their involvement in the research process. There is potential for this research to change the stories the participants live by through the “reality altering impact of the research process itself” (p. 67). It then becomes the responsibility of the researcher to “consciously channel this impact so that respondents gain self understanding and, ideally, self –determination through research participation” (p. 67). This is a responsibility I undertake when I consciously view the participants as co-constructors of the meaning of their narratives, and readers as co-constructors of the truths within them.

My methodological question “is not whether or not truth is found but what kind of truths are produced and through what technologies” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, pg.4) as revealed within our stories of experience. One of these technologies is language, which can be closely examined through methods of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis

If social and discursive practices are the vehicles that influence our development as individuals (B. Davies, 2001), a closer examination of these practices has the potential to enhance my understanding of the social worlds that are present in classrooms and re-presented in narratives of school experience. An examination of traces of Discourses within these particular narratives will then enable me to theorize beyond the narratives to consider the broader context of school as an institution and the dominant discourses that are embedded within it. Discourse analysis is “a method of qualitative research and a field of study devoted to understanding all

forms of spoken interaction and written texts. It views language critically as an activity that constructs reality rather than merely describing or referring to it” (“discourse analysis,” 2009). In recent years, education researchers have “turned to discourse analysis as a way to make sense of the ways in which people make meaning in educational contexts” (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 365).

Discourse analysis as a research methodology in education is rooted in linguistic theory and always incorporates a close study of language, yet it is utilized by researchers in a variety of ways. Essentially, discourse analysis continually connects the form of language (how we say or write things) with the function of language (what effect the language produces). In turn, what we say (or write) helps constitute who we are being at a given time and place within a given set of social practices (socially situated identities) (Gee, 2004).

A number of researchers have begun to combine critical theory with discourse analysis to create what has become known as *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Rogers et al., 2005). It emerged as an attempt to bring social theory and discourse analysis together to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which discourse, “constructs, becomes constructed by, represents, and becomes represented by the social world” (Rogers et al, 2005, p. 366). One of the key assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis is that power is located in the arena of language as a social practice. As Rogers et al. assert, “critical discourse analysts begin with an interest in understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequality” (p. 366). As Gee (2004) describes it

Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society, which is why they are always and everywhere ideological. Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status)

in a society. These Discourses empower those groups that have the least conflicts with their other Discourses when they use them. Let us call Discourses that lead to social goods in a society *dominant Discourses*, and let us refer to those groups that have the fewest conflicts when using them as *dominant groups*. (p. 39)

The situated identity of self as student is determined through assertions of the dominant discourses of schooling. What is most relevant about this perspective is the lens it offers me to examine perceptions of success and failure expressed within narratives of school experience. Success in school leads to the acquisition of social goods such as good grades, social status, monetary rewards and select privileges. Evaluative assessment practices embody dominant discourses by creating conditions of hierarchy in classrooms. Evaluative assessment experiences serve to position us within these hierarchies as we are ‘spoken into being’ by the evaluations assigned to us by our teachers. It is these notions of hierarchy and the situated identity of ‘self as student’ that I am attempting to uncover and understand.

When the experiences of students are examined within and across various contexts, such as during the early school years, middle years, high school and the present, it is possible to seek alignments and conflicts between the expressions of identity that emerge through the language in the narratives. These alignments and conflicts can potentially give rise to a new understanding of the role of Discourses in perpetuating social practices and entrenched situated identities. Rogers (2004) argues that this view of learning “is especially important for marginalized learners. It allows the complexity of shifting identity--and the attendant discourses--to emerge” (p. 66). The students whose experiences I am exploring in contrast to my own are marginalized learners. It is my hope that this process will shed light upon the complexity of shifting identities across

contexts and make possible a rethinking of the role of dominant discourses of schooling as expressed through evaluative assessment practices.

Schools as institutions are a distinctive social enterprise whose influences and impacts demand to be examined. As Gee (2004) writes

Schools recruit culturally and historically distinctive social languages, social practices (within which specific situated meanings are formed), and Discourses to form and reform, reward and punish, distinctive kinds of people (i.e. distinctive socially situated identities) with sociopolitical implications that shape our lives and societies. Because discourse analysis, construed in the sorts of ways I have here construed it, can speak to such matters, it is a potentially powerful tool for research in education. (p. 39)

My intention is to examine representations of ‘self’/situated identity and the Discourses that shape interpretations of measurement experiences in school. As I explore these alignments and conflicts within my narratives and those of the participants, it is my hope that we will come to new understandings that will help to transform the conditions under which students perceive their evaluations and the conditions under which institutions and society perpetuate hierarchical models of schooling as reflected by letter grade practices. As Rogers (2004) relates in her study “Literate Identities Across Contexts”

What is deeply problematic is that, despite proficiency and competency in a great number of contexts, adults (and children) often do not see themselves as competent and carry a negative sense of self, shaped by their history of participation with schools, into learning environments, shaping their own and their children’s education. What is needed, I argue, are a set of theories, methods and instructional interventions that allow educators to

describe and explain how people can see themselves as proficient in one context and deficient in another. I propose CDA can do this. (p. 52)

This research methodology enables me to view the evaluative experiences of the participants along with letter grades and report cards as part of the Discourses of schooling. Grades and report cards constitute a system of meanings that *reflect* a social reality (personal success or failure in school, placement at the top, bottom or outside of the social hierarchy of the classroom) and *construct* a social reality (situated identity of 'A' or 'F' student, success or failure, insider or outsider). The form of language expressed to students as we evaluate them serves the function of positioning them as particular situated identities within the social world of school and classroom.

Chapter 4: Research Method

I gathered various forms of research data throughout the study. The core of the data is my own narratives. These narratives are a series of autoethnographic vignettes that reveal and explore my own experiences within the cultural contexts of school. I audio recorded all of the group and individual interviews I held with participants and transcribed each of them. From the transcriptions I created a series of co-autoethnographies which, together with my own narratives, formed the basis of my interpretation and analysis. I kept a research log and created a series of reflective notes throughout the process. In addition to the individual and group interviews there was some email communication between myself and the participants. I was also provided with some artefacts of school experience such as report cards and photographs. The ways in which these sources of data were created is explained in this section.

As I attempt to pull together the methods of research that have brought me to this place, the compilation of a dissertation, I realize that the research process began long before I submitted a proposal to my dissertation committee. The research process began with the composition of my own narratives-of-self that were prompted by my early attempts to understand the reasons for my ongoing fascination with assessment and evaluation. These autoethnographic narratives served as the starting place for my selection of participants, the means of exploring the experiences of others, the co-construction of their narratives of experience, the analysis of the narratives and the representation of the narratives in the final document.

Autoethnography/Exploring my own experiences

The composition of my own narratives of school experience served as a way for me to ‘dig into’ the meaning and impact of evaluation and measurement processes on me, within the

cultural context of school. As I wrote and reflected upon several narrative pieces, my purpose was to uncover the reasons behind my persistent interest in the consequences of assessment and evaluation in classrooms. Initially, my consistent focus on this issue was confusing to me, in part because my experiences as a student had been successful ones. Why was it, then, that I was so interested in evaluation processes? I wondered. This first phase of narrative creation gave me some insight into the idea that even successful students can be shaped negatively by evaluation processes, which led me to a curiosity about the experiences of students not like me. As I experienced the self revelations that emerged from this process, I learned that autoethnography allows the researcher to delve into, and then express, the embodiment and the affective consequences of experience in a cultural context.

As I first considered the idea of writing stories of my own experiences in school, an image flashed into my consciousness. It was a memory of me as a 7-year-old sitting in my Grade 2 classroom, stuck on one word of a spelling test. As I tried to think of other ‘evaluation moments’ I saw myself at my high school graduation ceremony, flushed with shame at my lack of achievement while my father, the Superintendent, handed out diplomas on the stage, then at my desk in my first classroom as a teacher, trying to write my first report cards.

Sometimes memories stand out clearly. We can take ourselves back to particular moments in time and recall the smells, sounds and sights associated with the moment in vivid detail, while others come into our consciousness faintly, more as hints and flashes of an experience. The memories of these experiences stood out as powerful ones, emerging insistently ahead of other, more ephemeral ones, yet when I sat and tried to represent them in words, the first drafts were flat and devoid of context and detail. The genre of autoethnography utilizes a research approach called *systematic sociological introspection* (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in which

the researcher devotes focused attention and reflection upon his/her own experiences in order to bring to light the details and the meaning of those experiences. Sironen (1994) calls it *memory work*. Following their lead, I used various techniques to grant myself a clearer access to my memories. I looked at photographs of myself at those stages of my life. I looked for classrooms and gymnasiums that were similar to those of my memory, and sat in them, trying to embody the memories of ‘being’ in those spaces. I looked at my old report cards. I talked with friends and colleagues about their experiences of writing spelling tests, and graduating high school, and writing report cards. I listened to my students and my children as they talked about school, and I continued to write.

Through this sustained and focused reflection I discovered that I was more and more able to recall the details of my past experiences. As Davies et al. (2001) discovered in their collective storytelling project, *Becoming Schoolgirls*, the “opening of oneself into the current of memory, and the space of writing allows the memoirs to gather more details of the context, of the interactions, of the body located in time and space and discourse” (p. 169). I was gradually able to pull together the threads of my experience into a series of short, cohesive narratives based on my clearest memories of responses to evaluation in school.

Following the construction of these first narratives, I spent considerable time reflecting and writing about their meaning. I considered the personal, societal and cultural implications from various perspectives and continued to develop an understanding of the impact of my past experiences on my current perspectives as a student, as a teacher and as a researcher. More of my own stories emerged. I learned that the particularity of my experience had much to say about the experiences of others who inhabited my cultural milieu.

Telling my stories

I learned that evocative stories are contagious. One of the purposes of autoethnography is to present meaningful research in such a way that it invites and provokes a response from its audience. I began to share my stories with others and to pay attention to the responses they provoked. To my surprise, I discovered that when we tell personal stories, they ignite memories in the minds of our audience, and we are offered stories in response. It seems that these stories are most often connected to memories that contain powerful emotions.

A particularly memorable example of this phenomenon occurred at a dinner party one evening. I was sitting across from two women I knew, who had been friends for many years. One of them asked me what I was doing with my research and I offered a brief description of the stories I was writing and the directions I was hoping to take with my future work. Her response was, “That’s funny, I don’t really remember *anything* about those early years in school.” Her long-time friend suddenly burst out, “That’s because **you** were a Bluebird and **I** was a Buzzard!”¹ The friend went on to tell the story of her banishment to the Buzzard reading group in Grade 3, and the subsequent shame she continued to feel as an adult, even after successfully completing a university degree. I began to realize that there were many more powerful stories of evaluation waiting to be told.

I began to tell my stories to the student teachers in my *Evaluating and Reporting* courses at the beginning of each semester and to invite them to provide me with storied responses. As the number and variety of responses grew, I realized that “...the telling of stories, written and spoken, produces a web of experiences that are at once individual, interconnected, collective -

¹ Bluebirds and Buzzards were ubiquitous terms used to label reading groups in North American classrooms in the 1960’s and 70’s. The ‘top’ readers were labeled Bluebirds and the struggling readers were labeled Buzzards.

and political” (Davies et al., 2001, p. 169). Through this evolving ‘web of experiences’ I was becoming more aware of the power of stories to help us to deeply understand the collective experience of schooling and the cultural and political implications of the stories that were being told.

One of the things I love about stories is that they’re innately relational. I am “one-who-acts-in-relation-to-others-in-the-world” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p.251) by default. My experiences, and the stories that reflect them, do not occur in a social vacuum, they emerge from the ethnos of my construction as a successful, white, middle-class student and teacher. As such, the stories become “a revelation of the social and discursive processes through which we become individuals” (B. Davies, as cited in Davies et al., 2001, p. 170). All experience within a cultural milieu such as the school is a shared experience at the same time that it is an individual experience. The words that I heard, the experiences that I had - they happened to me, but I was not the only one there. There were others in those spaces with me who were hearing the same words and having similar or different experiences.

As I was working through the phases of writing my dissertation proposal, I attended a session about collaborative writing at a conference. There I discovered Carina Henriksson’s (2008) work, *Living Away from Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience*. I suddenly became aware of some of the biases in my work. As I sought storied responses to school evaluation from students, teachers and teaching colleagues, I was focusing my gaze on others who were very much like me. My students and colleagues tend to be white, middle class people with a history of success in school. They have powerful stories to tell, but I was creating a compendium of narratives that ignored the experiences of those *not* like me. I decided that I needed to explore and attempt to understand the experiences of *unsuccessful* students if I were

ever to be able to prepare my students to meet the needs of *all* children in their classrooms, not those who are most like them.²

When I thought back to my own stories and reflected on my experiences as a teacher, I realized that the evaluation moments I struggled with the most were those times when I felt forced to record failing marks for my students. When I went further back, to the stories of my experiences as a student, I found my own fear of failure, but not a trace of the unsuccessful students who must have been in those classrooms with me. I began to seek ways of shedding light on those absences.

Entering the Field: Inner Student Success Seminars

I spent a great deal of time searching for the appropriate participants to support my exploration of the experiences of marginalized students in classrooms. I began volunteering in the Adult Basic Education department at my institution in support of their Student Success Seminars called ‘Finding Your Inner Student’. The seminars generally proceed along the lines of the following anecdote.

I hurry down to Building 200 – far across campus from my office and the classrooms where I teach. I arrive at the small classroom that serves as the meeting space for ‘Inner Student’. The walls are covered with hand-lettered quotes in cloud shapes that convey messages like....”Success comes in cans!” and “If you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right!”

² I realize that there are many other potential avenues that thinking of this sort could lead me along. As we begin to explore the experiences of ‘others’, facets of gender, culture, sexuality and socio-economic status are also relevant. The scope of this dissertation, though, begins with an exploration of ‘not success’ as a starting point.

Ingrid, the Student Success Advisor, is already there cutting slices of cheese while Hannah, one of the students, empties boxes of crackers onto plates. The two are chatting quietly, Hannah's eager smile ever present, while Ingrid asks how things are going with her classes. Ingrid looks up and greets me with a smile and a hug as I join in on the conversation and the food preparation. The 'Finding Your Inner Student' seminar is to begin shortly. As students drift in, they offer to help with the food and start to move tables and chairs so that we can sit facing each other. Ingrid and I take a moment to discuss our plans for the day. I have brought along a Multiple Intelligences survey to serve as an opening for discussing learning styles and the complexity of intelligence. We'll spend the bulk of the time 'checking in' to see if students are in need of any specific support. Ingrid has plans to do a breathing exercise to close the session.

I notice that Amber has arrived. She sits next to Hannah and quietly asks her how her conversations with her family are going. Hannah has recently discovered her birth siblings in a distant province and has been connecting with them through Facebook. She's been excitedly sharing her news with anyone who will listen, and Amber obliges by commenting appreciatively on the pictures Hannah has printed off the internet and placed in her school bag. Shawn strolls in, his baggy jeans hanging low over his skater shoes and his ball cap firmly in place. His characteristic smile and the twinkle in his eye stand in contrast to the tightly wound way he holds his body as he slouches into a chair. Andrew arrives with a Subway sandwich in his hand. He walks in the door with Steve, the two of them arguing animatedly about some conspiracy theory related to the worldwide recession. Ingrid reminds everyone to get themselves some food and bring it to the table so that we can get started on the check-in.

Finding Your Inner Student is a support group for Adult Basic Education students that was created to provide emotional and informational support for students returning to school to

complete their high school graduation requirements. Adult Basic Education students are adults aged 17 and older who are returning to school to pursue a variety of goals such as increasing their numeracy and literacy skills, completing high school, upgrading high school credits or completing prerequisites for university degree programs.

Most ABE students, for a variety of reasons, ‘didn’t make it through’ high school the first time around and have decided to come back to school for another try. They are often in the midst of reflecting upon and attempting to move beyond their school experiences. Many of them have a conviction that they are capable of passing high school this time. I hoped that these people’s voluntary participation in the ‘Finding Your Inner Student’ seminars implied a willingness to explore past experiences and reframe their orientation to academic institutions as well as a desire to explore their experiences more deeply. I invited participants in the Inner Student support group to share their stories of school experience with me, and Amber, Hannah, Shawn and Andrew agreed to participate.

Story sharing and narrative construction

As I invited the participants into the project, I informed them that I wanted to try and meet with them in small groups so that we could share stories together. At the same time, I indicated that sharing their stories in a group setting wasn’t mandatory, and if they preferred to meet with me on their own, I would certainly accommodate their preference. I envisioned a collaborative story sharing approach wherein my stories would be used as a prompt for the emergence of theirs. Hannah was adamant in her desire to meet with me alone, while the others were agreeable to group meetings. Hannah and I met together four times over a three month period for approximately an hour each time. Amber, Shawn, Andrew and I met together four

times over a one month period. Following our group meetings, I arranged individual meetings with each of the participants in order to seek clarification of details and to review the narratives that I created based on each of their stories. I was able to meet with Amber three times after the group meetings, with Shawn twice, and with Andrew once. These meetings took place over two months following our group meetings. Amber and Hannah were also willing to communicate with me by email, so there was also an exchange of stories and comments back and forth between meetings. I audio-taped each of the face-to-face meetings using the Garage Band program on my laptop computer.

As I prepared for the group meetings, I was concerned that the participants would feel intimidated by the ‘academic’ trappings of a formal research environment, so I chose spaces on campus that were comfortable and welcoming, such as small classrooms with plants and kitchen facilities. I provided food and beverages in an attempt to create a relaxed social environment and set up my computer to record as unobtrusively as possible. I decided not to take notes during the meetings, but to rely on post-meeting reflections in my journal and on audio tapes of the sessions for data.

I was hoping to create a context in which meaning was co-constructed and understandings deepened and extended through the responses of fellow participants in the group discussions. I wanted the sharing of stories to become “a means to continue to construct identities through the telling, retelling, interpretation and reinterpretation of experience” (Taylor & Coia, 2006a, p. 61). I anticipated that some participants would not be able to tell their own stories immediately, and that the stories of my own experiences would help by opening spaces for comment and conversation, thus providing a safe place from which to begin to explore the topic and allow stories to emerge.

At the first group session and in my first interview with Hannah, I tried to be very clear about my intentions - that I was seeking to gather stories of their experience, and that I wanted to be very cautious about not speaking and writing *for* them rather than *with* them. I offered that each participant could write their own narratives out of the experiences that they shared with me, or they could allow me to compose the narratives on their behalf and to check back with them once the narratives were written. All of the participants indicated that they were more comfortable sharing their narratives with me orally than in writing. I assured them that as I composed the narratives I would check with them to see if they felt that each story was a clear representation of what they had intended to share.

With introductions and these assurances out of the way, I shared my first story and invited response. What happened during the first group sharing took me by surprise! Stories and reactions and comments started coming from all directions! Shawn was intensely determined to talk about his early school experiences - he spoke quickly and loudly and drowned out the voices of the others in the group and we let him talk until he ran out of steam. Then, others in the group began to share. As their stories of anger and pain washed over me, I thought, "I would never be able to keep up to this with note-taking. Thank goodness I'm recording this!" I was also shocked and horrified by what they were telling the group. As they talked, an internal response was running a constant dialogue in my head. I was thinking things like, *"If I had been their teacher, I would never have done that! If I had been that teacher, I would have been terrified of you! If only I had been there, I would have protected you! You can't tell me that no teachers care! Teachers care! They care a lot! I care! I care about my students and I would have cared about you!"*

After 65 minutes of intensive sharing, I drew the meeting to a close and invited the participants to join me again a week later.

Although I felt that I had been very clear about my intentions as I introduced the first group session, I made some startling discoveries about the research process that day. As I reflected and wrote about the experience that evening, I suddenly realized how unlike a researcher my responses had been. I knew that as a qualitative researcher I would be immersed in the research environment, yet I had entered that environment with a desire to understand the experiences of others. I knew in advance that I wouldn't be 'separate' from the research environment – that I would be making my own meaning of the experience, but I realized that my internal dialogue and my voiced responses were intensely coloured by my reaction to the differences between us rather than by the stance of a researcher who seeks to understand. My journal notes from that week reflect my developing understanding about my intentions as a researcher:

June 14, 2009

*I'm realizing, looking back at the interviews with Hannah, and thinking about my first group sessions, that I have been placing myself outside of these people's stories – as the 'other' in their stories, not as them....it is their experience that I am trying to understand...to get inside...as such, I **have** to get inside..try to feel what they are feeling...*

I went back to my readings about research methodology to rethink some of my understandings of the research process and made some revisions to my approach before the next sessions. I paid further attention to the methods of autoethnography (Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) and narrative research (Polkinghorne, 2007). Polkinghorne reminded me to be open to the voices of the participants and to let their stories be told:

Because interview texts are co-created, interviewers need to guard against simply producing the texts they had expected. By assuming an open listening stance and carefully attending to unexpected and unusual participant responses, they can assist in ensuring that the participant's own voice is heard and the text is not primarily an interviewer's own creation. It is the interviewer's task to empower participants by acknowledging that they are the only ones who have access to their experienced meaning. (p. 282)

This was an excellent reminder of the contrasts between an 'open listening stance' and my initial closed, reactive stance.

Another issue was challenging me as well. When I had experimented with the 'contagious story-sharing' approach with my teacher education students and invited them to respond to me with stories of their own, what I received were clearly and coherently constructed narratives that followed conventional narrative forms. This was not the case with the participants in this setting! This is reflected in another journal entry from that week:

June 16, 2009

I'm finding this awkward and difficult at times. I'm trying to learn how to listen and not talk during the interviews (not always successfully) and to ask the right kinds of questions that will give me the kinds of stories I want. I feel frustrated when I get short, un-fleshed out and un-narrative like responses.

Naively, I had anticipated that the participants would respond the way my university students had, but I hadn't thought through the differences in context. My students gave me well-constructed, storied responses because I assigned them to do so. The participants were in no such

relationship with me. They were not my students; I couldn't assign them anything – they were participating in my project with free and informed consent, and could withdraw anytime they wanted to without penalty. In addition, my students were in the process of completing their second university degrees. Presumably, they were quite comfortable completing a short writing assignment such as a storied response, whereas the participants were finishing high school as adults and had varied literacy skills, which may have made the task of presenting coherent, traditionally-constructed narratives a difficult task for them.

I realized that my expectations were going to have to shift, and that if I wanted to work with narratives that followed conventional forms, I would have to alter my approach. My reading about autoethnography and collective biography reminded me of ways that I could help the participants to access the embodiment of their experiences through guided reflection and possibly flesh out their narratives with more details from their memories.

I started the next session by admitting to the participants that I had unintentionally spent most of the previous session in reaction, rather than in an open listening stance. I reasserted that my true intent was to try to explore and understand *their* experiences. Andrew retorted that it would be impossible for me to fully understand their experiences without having experienced the context that accompanied them. I agreed with him. I reminded him about my spelling test story. I said, “This story isn't my whole school experience. It is a snapshot of my experience with school that told me a lot about who I was as a student – someone who really depended on approval and rewards like stickers and marks. In a similar way, the stories you share with me will be a small piece of your experiences that I hope will help me and you to understand more about who you were as a student. I will be trying to immerse myself in your stories and to understand your experiences through them, but I recognize that each story represents a moment, and not your

whole experience. I also believe that these moments can tell us a lot about the experiences of others. I will use your words to construct the stories out of our conversations, and then I'll bring them back to you so that you can tell me whether you think they represent the essence of the experience for you.”

Heads nodded around the table, and to my relief, each of them expressed a willingness to continue. I initiated a guided visualization through which I asked each of them to think of a moment in their school life where they felt they had been measured or evaluated. I asked them to close their eyes and visualize the physical space where this moment had occurred. I prompted them to think about what feelings they may have been experiencing, physically and emotionally, at that time. After several minutes of this prompting, I invited them to open their eyes and to share their stories.

Andrew spoke first. He told us a story about trying to alter his grade on a Science test in elementary school. His story was rich with details and full of powerful emotion. His story prompted much discussion, and stories began to emerge from Amber and Shawn as well. From then on, the sessions alternated between participants sharing stories, me sharing stories and all of us discussing them. Collaborative story sharing evolved through our subsequent sessions and I came away with hours of audio recording to analyze.

I then spent many hours listening to the audio files, transcribing them, and constructing a series of stories for each participant. After I had transcribed the files for a particular participant, I reflected on what I had heard, and then I wrote, from memory, what I hoped would be a cohesive vignette. I then went back to the transcripts and used the participant's actual phrases to replace mine in the stories as much as possible.

This was easier with some participants than with others. Andrew's story of the Science test (to be shared later), for example, emerged as a fairly cohesive narrative on its own, with little need for me to supply narrative details or constructs. I fleshed out the section where he talked about changing the D to a B by thinking through and trying to re-enact that painstaking process, then including those details. For others, such as Hannah, the transcripts represented nothing similar to a cohesive narrative. I pulled phrases and quotes from various locations within and across transcripts and inserted them into my narrative structure.

As I thought through how I might proceed to focus on Discourses and the use of language within the narratives, I decided that I needed to be more explicit within each narrative about which segments were the participant's exact words and which were narrative details and constructs supplied by me so that I could be clear in my analysis about what I had inserted and what the participants had said. I went back to the audio files and transcripts to ensure that I had encoded the participant's turn of phrases as close to exactly as possible. It was surprising to me to discover that sometimes when I thought I had transcribed exactly, I had actually inserted some of my own words and mixed them among theirs. This process helped me to uncover significant statements that I had not previously included and caused me to further revise the narratives. Within each narrative, I italicized all of the phrases that were exactly supplied by the participants and left un-italicized all of my narrative constructs, interpretations and added details. The stories that delineated the differences between their words and my words were the versions that I sent out to participants by email and that I used in our 'member checking' follow up interviews. I invited each participant to write on the paper copies of the stories and bring them to me, or to provide feedback during the face-to-face meeting. As we reviewed the stories, I drew particular attention to the narrative constructs I had included, in order to check and see if the participants

agreed with my interpretation. For example, in Amber's *Seeking Power* story, as I narrated her acts of stealing, I showed her that I had inserted, "It gave me a secret sense of power." I highlighted the phrase and asked her to let me know if that was how she felt, or if I had misinterpreted her motivation in the moment. She was in full agreement that a sense of power was what she felt while she was stealing and told me that it accurately portrayed that scene for her.

As we worked through this process, each person indicated to me that they felt the stories had captured what they wanted to convey. Shawn and Andrew both indicated that they were very comfortable with the way I had represented their stories, and they offered a few simple revisions. All four of them made comments like, "You really nailed it" and, "I think you did a really good job. This is exactly what it felt like." Amber and Hannah were more vocal about the parts of the stories they liked, parts that belonged somewhere else and parts that didn't make sense.

I recorded the conversations I had with the participants as they reviewed their stories, and kept the hard copies so that I could see their notes and my own from the conversations. I then transcribed the audio files of these conversations and revised the narratives once again. I made a diligent attempt to meet with each participant again to review the revised versions of their narratives. With Hannah and Amber I was able to present revised narratives and gather responses, which led to yet another set of (more minor) revisions, but with Shawn and Andrew this was not possible. For Hannah, part of this process continued by email:

June 4, 2009

Thanks for the e-mail. It sounded good. I like what you have done.

(Hannah, email correspondence in response to Titanic story draft)

Aug 3, 2009

...you have done an excellent job and even made me chuckle a few times.

(Hannah , email correspondence in response to Doctor story draft)

By this time the school term had ended and I had difficulty maintaining contact with Shawn and Andrew. I sent the revised versions of their narratives to them by email, and did not hear a reply from either of them.

I feel that this process has led to a series of stories that are genuinely co-constructed. This sense is stronger with Amber and Hannah's stories, as I was able to review the revised narratives with them at least twice. Andrew and Shawn were both willing and able to review and offer feedback on the first set of stories, and both agreed that they were comfortable with my representation. I have seen Shawn several times since the 'formal' research period, and he continues to be interested in the work. I have no reason to believe that he is dissatisfied with the way his stories have been represented, and he has not indicated any desire to revise them further.

Positionality of researcher

When I chose to use my own autoethnographic stories as launching points for discussion and gathering of narratives, I placed 'me' at the center of the research environment. At the same time, I am aware of my position at the margins of the participants' contexts. At the outset, I recognized that my experiences as a student are very different from those of the participants. As a teacher educator and PhD candidate, I represent 'success' as a student in the school system – a position that places me on the outside of the meaning and experience of school failure.

My experiences as a classroom teacher also influence my perspective as I try to analyze the meaning of the narratives. As a result of my classroom experience, I have formed various perceptions about the impact of my evaluative role in the classroom. These perceptions may be completely erroneous. Evaluation and measurement moments may not have the impact that I assume they do. I needed to be aware of this, and to use close listening and focused attention to open up my empathetic awareness of the experiences of others as I examined the narratives.

As I tried to make sense of my participants' representations of their experiences, I also tried to remain open to the inevitability of a shifting of my own sense of self as a student and as a teacher throughout this process. My personal research log and my analytic notes provided me with a space to work through these processes and weave them into the final analysis. I often went back to my research log to remind myself of emerging thoughts and responses that had been recorded along the way.

Working in Analytic Modes

Analytical processes have become a part of each step in this research journey. As Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing (1997) assert, in qualitative research "the entire process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation is tightly woven" (p. 169). I have become more intensely aware of the cyclical and recursive processes that lead me to a place of creating a document to report on what I have learned. Although analytic processes were embedded in the process of creating and revising the narratives, I feel that it is worthwhile to comment at greater length about the constructive and deconstructive processes I used to help me to make meaning of the participants experiences and ultimately of my own experiences.

Constructive processes – creating the narrative form

As I worked with the audio files that resulted from the interviews, I was aware of my need to attempt to remove *myself* from the stories of the participants as much as possible. I was trying to create a distance from my own stories and enter into an empathetic space that would allow me to ‘walk in their shoes’ through the school moments they had shared with me. I set aside time to ‘live’ with each of the participants through their stories. As I listened to group interviews, it was one particular voice I often listened to at a time. It took many hours, and often several days, to capture all that a particular participant had shared. At the conclusion of each segment of listening and transcribing (usually a 3-5 hour period) I sat and tried to focus my attention on trying to see and feel the essence of what that person had been describing, then I wrote a short story that I hoped would convey it. As my research log illustrates, I was trying to synthesize my understanding of the moments being expressed in a way that they would be accessible for others.

June 24

Narrative as a way of capturing the essence of an experience..it doesn't have to be an exact retelling, it is a synthesis of disparate comments and impressions into a cohesive whole – of the sort that other humans can relate to...empathize with....

I was mindful of my promise to the participants that I would use their words as much as possible, so, as I described earlier, I went back to the transcripts and purposely selected the words and turns of phrase they had used. Once I had decided on that path, I recognized some of the restrictions I was placing on my representation, while at the same time I was beginning to see how the narrative process was part of the analysis, not merely the preparation for it.

Research log: July 22:

There is sometimes a conflict between being careful about using their exact words so that I can look more intensively at the language later, and the narrative construction/creation...I'm not as free to mess with it, but maybe that's something I'll do after I do the coding – hmmm, or would it have been more efficient to have chosen aspects of the transcript to do the analysis on...no, because the creation of the narratives has allowed me to group similar ideas into themes as part of the process...hmmm

Inevitably, as the author, I was also selecting some moments and excluding others from each narrative. How did I make those selections? My intention was to focus on evaluation moments, but to also be willing to allow the speaker to say what he or she needed to say. I felt that I was working in a very interpretive mode – I was trying to follow the voice of the character who was narrating the story. There were many moments when I wondered whether particular incidents or statements 'belonged' in a narrative as I revised it, but as each character became clearer to me, there were statements that I could not ignore even though I didn't feel they 'fit'. At the same time I questioned my role in the process as I added the 'narrative constructs' to pull sometimes disparate statements together.

Research log: June 23

Some thoughts about constructing narratives from transcripts – Andrew talked about how I could never truly understand the experience of others, but my question is, can I get an essence of it...enough to communicate it, and help others understand it?

There is an interesting analytic step that takes place between interview, transcription and writing the story...they tell the story, I gather some key elements of it, but when I turn it into a narrative, add feelings and some concrete details....is it like the difference between a photograph

and a painting? It feels like the narrative elements ‘round it out’ somehow – add meat to the bones of it....

I spent a lot of time thinking about the meaning these people made of their experiences, and tried to quell my anxiety about whether I ‘got it all in’ or whether I included too much.

I’m sure it is clear to the reader that this was a messy, contradictory process of listening, focusing, writing, thinking, questioning and writing some more. Participant’s stories may leave out or obscure aspects of their experiences as the actual *events* occurred, but “the validity issue related to the evidence of the assembled texts is essentially determined by how well they are understood to express the actual *meaning* of experiences” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 481). This judgment can only be made by the participants.

Although their words were collated and represented through a lens of my understanding, the affirmations I received from each of the participants reassured me that I had captured their intended meaning. It is possible that the participants were reluctant to disagree with my representations of their narratives, but this was definitely not the sense I got as we met together to discuss them, or as I transcribed their responses later. Hannah and Amber in particular were quite forthcoming in their feedback and they offered various suggestions to improve the accuracy of the narratives. Amber went so far as to bring notes to some of the meetings, which indicated to me that she had closely examined the narratives and thought deeply about the messages they contained. I eventually recognized that the organizing structure that I provided for the narratives during this phase of the research was a significant first step in analyzing their meaning.

Deconstructive processes – zooming in

Once I felt satisfied that the narratives were adequate, I moved to another form of analysis which required a ‘zooming in’ on smaller units of meaning. I entered all of the narratives into NVIVO 8* and proceeded to comb through them in search of similarities and differences across participants and across contexts. I grouped the narratives by author, then by context – primary school, intermediate school, high school, student now, report card moments and ‘not student’ contexts. I created codes based on actions, perceptions, possible thematic categories and forms of language use.

I was applying some aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis which require the researcher to attend closely to various aspects of the *language in use* which reflects and creates social realities. The analysis phase of CDA requires a recursive process of micro and macro analysis as the researcher shifts between close attention to words and meanings within texts to the meaning of texts as a whole. Eventually, a synthesis of the analysis is intended to enable the researcher to recognize the Discourses at play within the data that can shed light on influences on the construction of social realities among the participants. I was thinking of Rogers’ (2004) interpretation of Discourse, which “moves beyond the examination of language ‘bits’ – or the grammatical packaging of language” (p. 239) to examine Discourses - the capital D indicating inclusion of ways of representing, being, believing, valuing, and feeling in the term. This conception of Discourse allowed me to connect the close examination of language use as a cultural expression with the use of autoethnography, which also explores cultural context. This analytic process also helped me to eventually decide upon how to group the narratives, and helped me to discern patterns and themes. I examined the words within the narratives associated

with particular themes, such as *failure* to get a sense of the *ways of being* that were illuminated through the way the participants used language in their narratives.

A specific example of this is an examination of the usage of *passive* vs. *active* language by participants as they described specific instances of their perceptions of failure. I was able to discern a marked difference in the meaning participants made of experiences when they talked about actions taken upon them as opposed to moments when they cast themselves as the actor.

*Amber: Okay well fine I'll **be** a failure then if that's what you think of me. (active – choosing to fail)*

*Shawn: Who was the one that said back then that I wasn't good enough and gave the marks? (passive – who **gave** me the marks?)*

Hannah: When I think about it now, it's like they just pushed me through to get me out of the way. (passive – they pushed me through)

The line-by-line analysis enabled me to move beyond the boundaries of individual participants and their stories to seek wider patterns of meaning across participants and across contexts. As I was highlighting and coding line after line in each narrative, connections and ideas were constantly sparking in my mind. I often alternated between coding and writing reflective notes throughout this stage of the process. I then utilized NVIVO's word web function to create graphic representations of the ideas I was exploring, which helped to take me further into interpretation of the narratives.

Re- Constructive processes – zooming out

The next logical step for me was to make some decisions about how I would synthesize my understanding of the narratives in a way that would convey their power to a wider audience.

The biggest challenge was to seek an organizing structure for the whole that would be logical. I was initially inclined to be congruent with the forms of ‘story’ that I was most familiar with – an Aristotelian temporal ordering of story that leads the reader from the beginning (early experiences with school) to the middle (middle and secondary school) to the end (the present – stories of students now). As I worked through a process of connecting and presenting the stories, I realized that each set of stories could be presented as a counter to my stories, thus enabling me to further delve into the meaning I made of *my own* experiences when I considered them in relation to the stories of the participants. This latter phase really helped to crystallize what I had been learning while I was lost in the stories of the participants. I was back in the center of the stories again, but as someone who saw herself anew.

I eventually realized that the episodic ordering of stories from beginning to middle to end wasn’t the way I needed to represent them. They didn’t fall nicely into those neat categories. What I decided on was a presentation of the most obvious moments of measurement – moments of receiving report cards – followed by a peeling back of the layers of experience. I begin with the report card itself, then I present the narratives, my reflections, and thematic discussion in an order that is intended to bring the reader closer and closer to the core of the experiences of success and not success, and the impacts of evaluation on what we come to believe about ourselves.

Chapter 5: The Stories and Thematic Discussion

The narrative experience

Reading these narrative accounts of the experiences of others is intended to be an active process of meaning construction on the part of the reader.

I invite the reader next into an engagement with the narratives themselves. An important thing to consider before engaging with the narratives is the nature of reader-constructed interpretation and the intentions of the author. The interpretation of narratives is a personally constructive experience through which each of us makes meaning of the text beyond the bare comprehension of words on a page. The narratives that follow are my stories and the stories of the participants but they

are also the readers' stories, for through reading, readers construct their own meanings and identify with or resist certain elements of the story. How they do so not only reflects back on them and their own values and notions of themselves, but also implicates them as collaborators in the creation of the meaning of the text. (Tsang, 2000, p. 47)

This kind of writing (and reading) “fits with poststructuralist views that stress the interaction of the reader and the text as a coproduction, and reading as a performance. As part of this performance, readers must be prepared to make meaning as they read, put something of their own into the account, and do something with it” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 96). The narratives presented within this dissertation are intentionally open to interpretation. Although I provide interpretive commentary along with the narratives, spaces are provided for each reader to make their own meaning as well. The purpose of my commentary is to enhance and deepen the meaning of the stories for the reader. As Polkinghorne (2007) asserts

The general purpose of an interpretative analysis of storied texts is to deepen the reader's understanding of the meaning conveyed in a story. An interpretation is not simply a summary or précis of a storied text. It is a commentary that uncovers and clarifies the meaning of the text. It draws out implications in the text for understanding other texts and for revealing the impact of the social and cultural setting on people's lives. (p. 483)

My aim "is not to prompt a single, closed, convergent reading but to persuade readers to contribute answers to the dilemmas they pose" (Barone, 1995, p. 66). Each narrative poses many dilemmas and many possible interpretations. In the commentary and thematic discussions that accompany the narratives I offer some of my interpretations and responses to these dilemmas, yet there is room for many possibilities and avenues for the reader to explore.

It is my hope that each reader will enter into a personal engagement with the stories and take away an intention to contribute his or her own response to the dilemmas they discover in the spaces between teller, text and audience.

Report Card Moments

Grades and report cards are a function of the institution of school, however, they mask the reality that evaluation of students is a very human process.

The distribution of report cards is a highly ritualized process. A sense of anticipation looms all day on Report Card Day. A silence descends in the classroom as the official-looking envelopes are distributed to student after student. Even when teachers admonish students to keep the envelopes closed and their marks to themselves, a whispered buzz of 'whadja get?' pervades

the room. As students spill out of the classroom, they may leave them untouched, but many students rip into the envelopes, looking for their grades, while others stuff them to the bottom of their bags and hope that their parents won't remember that it's Report Card Day.

Students with 'good' report cards look forward to the approval that will greet them when they get home. Students with 'bad' report cards have no way out. They can rip them up, hide them in their bags or steal away to private spaces to examine them, but they don't disappear. In one extreme example, an 11-year-old boy in Arkansas recently faked his own kidnapping to avoid delivering his report card home to his parents (Campbell, 2009).

Classroom teaching is an intensely human process, yet the task of creating the grades and report cards that students carry home requires that teachers convert the complex reality of life and learning in classrooms into numbers and symbols and apply them to students. The narratives that are included in this section invite the reader to consider the very human experience of creating and of receiving report cards. The first narrative is an autoethnographic account of my experience of creating report cards as a novice teacher.

When I decided to become a teacher, my motivation was partially based on a desire to help children to recognize their education as more than a quest for approval from adults. I was fiercely determined to become the sort of teacher who would inspire her students to be fully engaged in education for the sake of learning. The harsh reality of the role I was 'trained into' became fiercely evident as I struggled to write my first report cards as the *e-value*-ator – the one who bestows the grades. This is a story of a beginning teacher's dawning realization of the impact those grades may have on her students.

Paige: First Reports

My first year of teaching was in a grade 6/7 classroom in the city. The experience was transformative to say the least. I graduated from teacher's college at the top of my class and had abundant confidence in my abilities. I was hired partway through the school year and walked into an established classroom that taught me how little I knew. The reality of my responsibility to this group of students scared the hell out of me. I set to work implementing all of the strategies I had learned in university as I struggled to make sense of the complexities of classroom life. I reassured myself that I had all of the latest instructional theory to rely on and that the students would benefit from my expertise.

Alice stood out right away. It was obvious within the first hour that she was shunned by the other students. She was quiet, mousy and withdrawn, set apart by a refusal of the others to acknowledge her presence. Academically, she was a below average student. Her face was often hidden behind her long bangs as she toiled quietly at her desk. She was never invited to participate in group projects for fear that she would not contribute, or that she would bring down the marks for the group. I made up my mind to do what I could to increase her self esteem and to help her obtain some status in the classroom. I created group projects that allowed for a variety of representations of learning. I encouraged her to submit a drawing and a poem to the student newspaper and to share her ideas with others. She began to respond to this encouragement and I was hopeful that I would see an increase in her confidence.

I can still see myself sitting in that first classroom, preparing to write my first report cards. It's late at night. The empty desks in the darkened classroom are arranged in neat rows, silent without their inhabitants. I'm bathed in a pool of light at my desk which is covered with books and papers – they're stacked up and falling off the edges. I've surrounded myself with all

of the notebooks and assignments I can find for each student. I have a marks book, full of rows of black and red numbers. With my calculator, I determine the weight of each of those numbers. I have a file folder filled with notes and observations. My attention is constantly shifting from marks book, to notebooks, to file folder, to scraps of paper, as I desperately try to review the evidence in front of me.

I start with the easiest ones first, the 'top' students, and my desperation calms as I fall into a comfortable pattern of calculating and averaging scores in my record book, then entering marks and comments on the official form. I begin to feel confident in my ability to complete this process – I have the data required to justify my grades. My administrator and the parents will have no doubts about the validity of my judgement, I tell myself. The students will recognize that their efforts have earned them their grades and they will have no justification to question them.

As part of my teacher training at the university, I was taught all about accurate scoring, the science of test construction and the bell curve. My mentors and fellow teachers admonished me to mark absolutely everything. This way, they promised, I can be sure of my ability to justify the letter grades I give my students. I've created and marked examinations, quizzes, projects, and assignments all for the purpose of gathering evidence for this moment, writing the report cards.

When I look along the row of marks I have for Alice, I see them neatly laid out, 5/10, 12/20, 4/10, 13/30 and so on. No matter how many times I add and average with my calculator, I end up with the same dismal averages – 52% in Math, 55% in Language Arts, 48% in Social Studies. I have to reassure myself that the numbers in the book don't lie. If I've kept faithful records - and I have - then she's earned these marks. Even though I've spent all term encouraging Alice, helping her to see the things she is learning to do, I am forced to record C-,

D, and F into my book. The marks don't lie. My colleagues would tell me to rely on my judgment. This student is below average, that's all there is to it. I have to fail her.

Although I tell myself these things, I can't help but feel sick about the whole process. My palms are sweating, my stomach is churning, and I feel hot right up through the roots of my hair. Reluctantly, I write the marks on the front of the report card and try to write encouraging comments on the back. I can't get her face out of my mind - the look of disbelief I expect I'll see when she looks at her report card. Or will it be a look of resignation? I sigh deeply, put her books away, and gather the materials to calculate grades for the next student.

This story has been central to my developing understanding of the tensions I experience in the role of teacher. The core ethical dilemma of combining the coaching and judging functions that are inherent in the role of teachers in public school systems presented itself to me within the first three months of my teaching career. I was clearly distressed and uncomfortable as I utilized the processes I had been taught to use, and sought reassurance in tradition. The long rows of black and red numbers, accurately calculated, checked, and double-checked provided me with an illusion of the 'rightness' of my grades. I didn't question the assumption that grades are the 'right' way to communicate the value of academic achievement as I had been taught in my teacher education courses. I knew that I was bound by the institutional structure of the school system and by societal expectations to continue to use them. I felt the tensions, but I dutifully 'did my job' in spite of the angst I was feeling.

The composition of this story, many years later, helped me to see that this was my first realization of the power I was being asked to wield as a teacher. It also brought Alice and her classmates clearly back into my mind. I began to wonder again, as I had in that moment, about the impact of that report card on Alice. As I made the decision to explore the experiences of

students who had experienced failure in school, I became aware that it was, in many ways, the experience of Alice that I was seeking to understand. I really had no idea of how she had reacted to receiving that report card or of how it might have felt to take home reports that contained failing grades.

In one of our story-sharing sessions, I asked the participants to think about occasions of receiving report cards while they were in school, and I sought to recall my own experiences of receiving report cards. I hoped that these stories would help me to understand what Alice's experience might have been like and give me some insight into the power of our report card moments to resonate throughout our lives.

I realized that I have no particular memories of moments when I had taken report cards home and discussed them with my parents. What I remember about my report cards is that they were all pretty much the same until I got to high school. There were comments about the fact that I talked too much in class followed by a column of A's and B's. I usually got 'S for Satisfactory' rather than 'G for Good' in the effort section because of my constant socializing. As my marks were generally good, there was usually little reaction from my parents other than a mild reproach for talking too much in class. My brothers, on the other hand, rarely got good marks in school. From their perspective, anything over a 'C' was good news.

The only report card moment I clearly remember is an incident that involves report cards that my brothers brought home. For reasons I have not yet comprehended, I felt threatened by the possibility that they would receive some approval that wouldn't be mine, so I acted to divert attention away from their accomplishments.

Paige: This is MY moment

I think I was about nine or ten, in grade three or four. For some reason that I don't recall, my older brothers brought report cards home one day and I didn't have one. Otherwise, after-school time on this day was pretty typical. My Mom bustled back and forth between kitchen and dining room, putting the finishing touches on dinner and setting the table while I practiced piano in the living room. The rule was that I had to finish practicing before Dad got home from work so that he wouldn't be disturbed. After struggling through scales and exercises for a half hour or so, I drifted towards the kitchen to see what was for dinner. As I passed the table, I noticed nothing unusual. The practical white plates sat waiting, flanked by knives and forks, which stood at attention in their appointed places; me and Geoff on one side, and Scott on the other, Mom at one end, Dad at the head of the table. Mom swooped into the dining room and carefully placed the two report cards next to the boy's plates.

I stood looking at the report cards in their places of honour, the table set and waiting for the family to sit down. They were printed on a thick sage-green paper which I noticed was oddly soft to the touch when I picked up the report closest to me – Geoff's. I glanced around to see if my Mom could see me from the kitchen. She was busy at the stove, her back to me. Hesitatingly at first, then hastily, while my Mom's back was still turned, I chewed a small piece off one corner of the report card. I can remember the feel of the thick paper, dry under my teeth at first, then slimy and pliable as my saliva soaked into it enough to allow me to twist the paper away from me, leaving a ragged corner clamped between my front teeth. I continued, neatly chewing and tearing a small piece off each corner of the report. I placed it back exactly as it had been, lined up straight beside Geoff's fork, and created a little pile of the chewed off corners next to it. Another quick glance at the kitchen revealed that Mom was still stirring the gravy. I crept

around to the other side of the table and repeated the procedure with Scott's report card; chewing off each corner then replacing the report alongside his fork and piling the chewed bits next to it, as if it had never been disturbed. I darted out of the dining room and sat down in the living room, waiting to nonchalantly stroll over to the table when Dad came home and Mom called us to dinner.

It is difficult for me to articulate what it was that made this story emerge, but it speaks to me of the societal reverence with which we hold report cards. It also reveals the traditional hierarchy within my family, where the father's role was to pass judgment on the achievements of the children. All was laid out in preparation for his ceremonious arrival home and the subsequent inspection of the reports. The act of defacing my brother's report cards and risking punishment from my parents was a very unusual thing for me to do, as I was a child who placed huge importance on adult approval. In retrospect, it seems that I was driven to keep that approval for myself, as if there was not enough to go around.

As the participants shared stories of their report card moments I became intensely aware of the similarities and the contrasts between our experiences. Moments of receiving report cards and taking them home for inspection by our parents stand out as crucial junctures in our school careers when our suspicions of how we were valued by our teachers were made official. These institutional markers connected home and school and offered our families a measuring stick by which they could find out if we were 'making the grade' or not. While I was 'making the grade' by getting high marks, there was little reaction to my report cards. For students who are failing, students like Alice, the sharing of the report card becomes a painful incident. For Amber, each report card contained another confirmation of her inability to learn, and another remonstrations to try harder.

Amber: E is for Effort and F is for Fabulous

Report card time was a real treat. You'd get the report card in class, look at it, and see, "You need to apply yourself more." Well yeah one of them, I'd think – I'd stuff it in my bag and take it home. There was a lot of times I wouldn't give it to my parents until they asked for it, but with a brother and sister bringing them home too I couldn't get away with that for long. I worried about what my Dad would say because I didn't want to disappoint him. My parents would finally ask and I'd drag the crumpled report card out of my bag, give it to them and stand there and sigh, and think, "Oh boy. Here we go again." Basically all my report cards said pretty much the same thing, "She's a nice quiet student and she could apply herself more." followed by a lot of E's and F's. I'd be standing there thinking, "Okay, well, whatever."

My Mom would just joke about it. She knew I had a problem and was probably trying to make me feel better. She'd say, "Oh honey, E is for Effort and F is for Fabulous!" My Dad was the strong silent type – he'd kind of glance at the report, then go back to what he was doing, or go "Pffffffft!" He was disgusted with the fact that here I wasn't getting it and I was trying my best. You know, every parent wants their child to be perfect. He looked at me one time and just said, "You are such a failure."

"Well", I thought to myself. "Okay well fine I'll be a failure then if that's what you think of me - I'll live up to your standards Dad!" I just got to the point where I really didn't care.

*I always thought something was really wrong with me, but seriously I got to the point where I just didn't care about the grades. You **had** to get to a point where you didn't care. Here's a way to think about it. It's like when you're in a relationship and you try and try and you get to that point where you say, "This is like banging my head against a wall. I really don't care.*

I need to get out of here now.” That’s what letting go of caring about grades feels like – it’s a relief.

‘Every parent wants their child to be perfect’.... ‘I was trying my best.’ These are the statements that first resonated for me as I rethought my experience in contrast with Amber’s. I wasn’t trying *my* best but my grades were sure to gain me the approval of my parents. Even my constant socializing was treated as a by-product of my superior ability – the message I received was that it was perfectly normal for me to talk too much because I wasn’t being challenged enough.

Amber says that she learned to disengage her emotions from her report cards and learned not to care about grades. Her relief was hard won. It sounds like it was mandatory for her emotional survival. It came after years of ‘banging her head against the wall’. I wonder whether this learning not to care was a wall, separating her from the caring, as opposed to an absence of emotional response?

Shawn adamantly insists that he learned not to care about grades as well. His anger at the system and the people who give the grades burns with a fierce intensity.

Shawn: There was no point

*There was no point in looking at report cards. I already knew it was going to be prepped scores so why bother looking at them? Most of the time I ripped them up and threw them in the garbage. If I looked at the report card and saw that I had failed, that would just bring me down much more. Even when I did try as hard as I did apparently my hardest wasn’t good enough. Who was the one that said back then that I wasn’t good enough and gave the marks? **Who** said that I wasn’t good enough? The guy dishing up the report card doesn’t even know me. He’s*

never walked a mile in my shoes. That guy telling me I wasn't good enough. I'd like to meet him. I'd punch him right in the face.

*The purpose of grades is to judge people and it's a government thing I swear to God it's a government thing to show - like for grades it's like this kids doing good this kids doing good this kid's got an F and was cast onto the side. Grades just segregate people and makes the slower people feel like crap and the people who are important, important. I believe grades represented how stupid I was. I didn't think they were **who** I was – they made me feel stupid more than who I was cause I already knew I was stupid. I may have been a fun and funny laughing kid happy on the outside but I was dead on the inside.*

Here's how you learn not to care about grades. You have to. It's pretty much like having a bucket full of water and dragging it around. You drag it around for so long and it's this weight, then you empty it. Then the weight is gone and what you're feeling inside is no longer anything. It's empty.

You ask me if a mark on a report card is a mark on me. Here's what I say to that; it totally is. It totally is. It's just picking people apart and no longer calling them people. It's calling them letters and names like you're letter A cause you get straight A's. And if you're not getting straight A's and participating in school activities like the chess club then you're a failure.

Shawn talks about letting go of caring about grades in a way very similar to Amber – like it's a key to survival, a necessity, yet on the other hand; he acknowledges the notion that he was marked by his marks. He rails at a system that turned him into a subject that could be identified by the letters that were assigned to him.

For Hannah, report card time brought feelings of dread. Instead of getting letter grades, she often got 'Modified' - a grade that is supplied for students on specialized educational

programs who would not be deemed capable of achieving ‘regular’ grades. For Hannah, ‘Modified’ didn’t feel any better than ‘F’. She knew she didn’t make the grade.

Hannah: Modified, Modified, Modified

I always dreaded report cards because I knew I wasn’t going to do well. I hated them. I would get my report card, and look at it with this horrible feeling. I would get it home and take it up to my room. I had to look at it first, before I would hand it over to my Mom. A lot of times it was like, very low, they would just modify it so that I could pass, really. I looked for the grades inside, and instead of grades, I’d get Modified, Modified, Modified. Even if I did get a grade, it didn’t seem real. A ‘C’ in Science? I’d never get that now...what did it mean then? That mark probably didn’t mean anything....it was probably modified too. When I think about it now, it’s like they just pushed me through to get me out of the way.

From Hannah’s perspective, the policy of awarding a modified grade rather than a ‘real’ one did no more than make her feel that *they* were just pushing her through the system. She was very aware of the fact that a modified grade is a mask for an ‘F’.

Andrew’s feelings about report cards and grades run so deep, he insisted that he could write a novel about it, yet he refused to share anything beyond that.

Andrew: I could write you a novel

What was funny about grades and report cards in school was that my Mom would look right away at the effort mark, and my Dad would look at the grade. My mom cared more about the effort than the grade. I could write you a novel on what grades make you believe about yourself.

What *do* grades make you believe about yourself? Each of us could ask ourselves that question. At a personal level, I ask myself, “How could I have avoided causing moments like these for my students?” I wonder whether my colleagues feel the same way I do about assigning grades. A series of BCTF-sponsored surveys of British Columbia teacher’s working realities (Naylor, 2001; Naylor & Malcomson, 2001) found that a significant number of teachers in BC view assessment and reporting as a major factor in high stress levels and overwhelming workloads. Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, and Manning (2001) indicate that teachers refer to assessment as the hardest part of their work. I know from personal experience that creating report cards is one of the most stressful things teachers do. As a member of a profession, I ask myself, “How is it that we teachers can feel such discomfort with giving grades, and inflict such painful moments on our students, yet continue to do it, year after year?” Another question we could ask, is, “What is the function of grades in our school system?”

Foucault enters the conversation

When I look back at the First Reports story, I can see it as a story of a beginning teacher trying to make sense of the institutionalized system of letter grades that she is required to use and the impacts these grades might have on her students. When I consider the stories shared by Amber, Shawn, Hannah and Andrew, I begin to get a sense of what those impacts might be. These are only five people’s stories. These are five people within the milieu of the millions who have been students and teachers, but they are worthwhile in the way that Foucault envisions the worthwhile story - ones that are “transgressive” in that they “challenge absolutes considered sacred and beyond interrogation.... or call into question attitudes about prevailing social practices” (Barone, 2000, p. 128). The process of evaluating and assigning letter grades to

students is an ‘absolute’ of the school experience, but it is not, and should not be, beyond interrogation.

A consideration of Foucault’s theoretical perspective on the institution of school offers a particular sort of insight into these stories and these questions. Within these stories, I see powerful traces of the characteristics of modern institutions and their impact on the people within them that Foucault described in several of his interviews and essays, and particularly in his critique of the modern institution, *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

Discipline and Punish (1977) is a genealogy of the development of the modern institution. A genealogy, as he enacts it in this work, is “part historical reconstruction of the way certain concepts have come to have the shape they do, and part a ‘rational reconstruction’ or story about the function they serve, which may or may not correspond to historical evolution” (“genealogy,” 2008). This ‘part historical reconstruction’ and part ‘rational reconstruction’ offers a radical perspective on the development and function of modern institutions such as prisons, the military, hospitals, factories and schools. What is most relevant here is his discussion of the ways in which the student is made ‘subject’ through the quantification of student learning, the hierarchical structures that are created through ‘the examination’ and the normalizing function of schools, and the relationships of power that exist within the institution that hold such practices in place.

An interesting challenge is presented to writers who choose to apply Foucault’s work in that the entirety of his philosophy is often contradictory, so that a ‘definitive’ reading is nearly impossible (Jones & Brown, 2001; Wain, 1996). What is useful to consider, then, is Foucault’s (1975) own advice to take and use his ideas as ‘little tool boxes’

If people want to open them, or to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of power, including eventually those from which my books have emerged. . .so much the better. (p.115)

I use Foucault's sentences and ideas as my 'little tool boxes' to think about the ways that the self becomes subject through our evaluation processes, and the relevance of power relations to grading and reporting practices.

As Foucault traced the history of punishment he began, startlingly, with the graphic depiction of an episode of torture which took place in France in the late 1700's. The torture was carried out by an executioner as the punishment for the attempted murder of Louis the XV of France. This direct and explicit form of punishment, Foucault asserts, was gradually replaced by more physically removed forms of punishment within the evolving institution of the prison. Forms of punishment in prisons began to be standardized, thus the prisoner was made 'subject' within the institution by the imposition of absolute control over his body and mind, his sleeping and waking, his eating, socializing and working. According to Foucault, to punish and to discipline is to turn people "into certain kinds of subjects, in a sense of bringing them to act in accordance with disciplinary norms and standards, behavioural ideals which the human sciences define as normal, natural or essentially human" (as cited in Falzon, 1997, p. 228). He then looked beyond the prison to the development of common institutions - the military barracks, the hospital and the school, and at the order and discipline that is the fundamental character of membership in these institutions. Foucault's concern was with the ways in which humans become 'cases' or 'subjects' through their membership in institutions. When functions within the institution, particularly the functions of discipline and order, are standardized, the processes that humans are required to engage in are removed from the physicality of human existence. The

institutional space and the people within it function more like cogs in a machine than like humans.

It might seem implausible to connect the history of execution, torture and prisons to the ways we evaluate students in schools, but I argue that there are many similarities. Teachers are dedicated to supporting their students, and do so when they enact their role as ‘coach’ or mentor by providing feedback and supporting their learning processes (Cooper, 2007). At the same time, they are enmeshed in a network of power relations within the institution of the school that require them to judge their students in quantifiable and symbolic terms through letter grades and percentages on report cards. These two realities do not coexist comfortably. For a teacher to see herself as a judge of her students, and as a ‘giver of grades’, a variety of what Foucault would call ‘rituals of truth’ or ‘truth/knowledge’ claims must be assumed. The assumptions that underlie the processes that I, as a teacher, enacted in my First Reports classroom are that learning is quantifiable, precise grades are obtained through a scientific process of data gathering and calculation, the power to create grades rests in the hands of the teacher, teachers fail students and students earn the grades they are given, a natural hierarchy exists in classrooms and grades are an inescapable and inevitable aspect of teaching and learning.

I was trained to mark absolutely everything so as to provide myself with a long list of numbers that could be added and averaged to create a grade. Each learning event was accompanied by an assignment that was intended to provide ‘evidence’ of the learning that had occurred. Each piece of paper produced by students – paragraphs, homework, quizzes, tests and projects – was marked with a number. All of the numbers were then carefully entered, according to their subject area, into my records book. The list of numbers, the stacks of evidence, the calculator and the letter grades that I describe in the First Reports story are markers of an

“educational space that functions as a learning machine” (Foucault, 1977, p. 147) and a “pedagogy that functions as a science” (p.187). The numbers that carried the most weight in those rows of numbers that I had generated were the test scores. In current educational spaces, tests and examinations are almost universally viewed as the most valid and reliable means of measuring student learning (Popham, 2001). Foucault (1977) viewed the examination as a highly ritualized mechanism of discipline, a means of establishing a visibility through which students are differentiated, judged, surveiled and normalized.

The teacher who views herself as a scientist is representative of an educational tradition that asks teachers to describe in “quantitative, empirical terms whether or not the goals of the curriculum were achieved” (Eisner, 1976, p. 136). The rows of numbers and the quasi-scientific calculation of grades that I was taught to use offered me the opportunity to remove myself from the human consequences of assigning grades as symbols of student achievement. The numbers helped me create an educational space that “functions/ed as a learning machine,” (Foucault, 1977, p. 147) and made it possible to objectify all of my students as subjects or ‘cases’.

One thing that makes it possible for teachers to assign substandard and failing grades to students is the assumption of truth/knowledge that grades are true representations of student learning. The symbolic description enclosed in the report card “makes each individual a ‘case’ ...this description becomes a means of control and a method of domination...this turning of real lives into writing ... functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection” (Foucault, 1977, p. 192). The rows of numbers in marks books reassure teachers that their scientific procedures are sound, and that the objects of these grades (the students) are not personally affected, even though they are the objects of the *e-value*-ations that grades impart. Teachers are reminded by their colleagues, as I was, that ‘numbers don’t lie’. If this is the case, then Alice

earned her C minuses and F's, and we can also assume that Amber earned her 'E's and F's' and that Shawn earned the failing grades and 'prepped scores' that he crumpled and threw away. My 'supposedly-scientific' calculations permitted me to reassure myself that it was Alice's learning objects that were being measured, not her personal value. With this in mind

one can grasp what Foucault means when he says that disciplinary power produces subjects: the score a student obtains becomes part of who the student is: an average student, in the bottom decile, a perfect scorer, smarter than her brother, too dumb for Princeton. (Schrag, 1999, p. 378)

Report cards are the means to make visible and communicate the judgments we apply to our students. The report card communicates the calculated value supplied by the learning machine.

A Foucauldian gaze upon these stories also draws attention to the way in which report cards, like examinations, combine hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgement. Many researchers have commented on the ways in which evaluative summative assessments such as letter grades, standardized tests and examinations lead to increased differentiation and stratification of peer groups, particularly in the case of norm-referenced assessments (Crooks, 1988; Harlen, 2004; Natriello, 1987; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). "In a sense," Foucault (1977) argues, "the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another" (p. 184). When we evaluate and quantify student learning, and thereby students themselves, we achieve two effects; we normalize students by labelling them in terms of commonly understood symbols (A's, F's) while at the same time we rank them individually along a hierarchical scale which compares them to their peers. Thanks to this process, each of the students can be

put in his or her place on a finely graded hierarchy - one that is organized around the concept of the norm. The examination, therefore, illustrates a prominent way in which power and truth, according to Foucault, are connected in modern society. Without power over students, examinations could not yield 'truths' about them and these 'truths' could not be used for purposes of 'placing' them in social hierarchies and shaping their expectations of themselves and others. (Schrag, 1999, p. 377)

There was very clearly a hierarchy in place in that First Reports classroom when I arrived. Aside from the hierarchies implicit in adult/child and teacher/student relationships, a hierarchy had been established among the students. The students appeared to be able to make very clear distinctions about who had value and who didn't in the social network of relationships in the class. Alice's status near the bottom of this ranking was almost assuredly related to the status that was afforded by her apparent lack of 'intelligence status' as became evident when her grades were calculated. All of my efforts to help Alice achieve status through developing her confidence were potentially shattered by the harsh reality that her meager scores offered up in terms of her letter grade ranking. The participants' stories offer glimpses of what that reality might have been as a result of the rankings their report cards implied. Shawn was the most explicit on this point when he said, "Grades just segregate people and makes the slower people feel like crap and the people who are important, important...." He went on to articulate the feelings of subjection, objectification and exclusion he felt as a result of his failing grades.

You ask me if a mark on a report card is a mark on me. Here's what I say to that; it totally is. It totally is. It's just picking people apart and no longer calling them people. It's calling them letters and names like you're letter A cause you get straight A's. And if

you're not getting straight A's and participating in school activities like the chess club then you're a failure.

Amber also reflected this sentiment when she said:

I sometimes think about what's been drilled into us since we were young – that everybody has to compete. There are these groups – you know, like the bird groups? The Buzzards are here and the Bluebirds are there because they're doing better and you're always sitting there thinking, "Why can't I be like that?"

The Bluebirds and the letter A kids stand at the top of the hierarchy of success in Amber and Shawn's remembrances, while they stand at the bottom as the Failure and the Buzzard.

How do Foucault's notions of punishment and reward enter into the Alice narrative? As he asserted, "...distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role; it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes, but it also punishes and rewards" (1977, p. 181). Punishment and rewards can be viewed as two sides of the same coin - power and control - in that good grades control through seduction and manipulation while bad grades control through punishment (Kohn, 1993, 2004). Who was punished and who rewarded by the grades in my classroom? It is clear that even though I attempted to justify my grading systems, I felt that grades represented punishment and rewards and that I was punishing Alice through her grades even though I was reluctant to do so. As the teacher, I was also punished by feelings of responsibility and guilt for the pain I perceived those grades would cause. Undoubtedly I felt much less tortured when I was able to reward other students with high grades, although I have little memory of writing those 'good reports' that year.

What is it that caused me to enact the practice of assigning Alice's grades even when I felt 'tortured' by the process? I was controlled by the power of the institution. I was enmeshed in

a web of power relations that hold such practices in institutions in place. Foucault (1977) described power as a web, a relationship, a multiplicity of force relations. A network of relations was at play as I calculated the marks on Alice's report card, some aspects of which are discernable, and many of which are not. There was the force of authority that was transmitted by my professors during teacher training that described student assessment as a science of general tendencies and main effects (Eisner, 1976). Mentor teachers and colleagues further corroborated the necessity of 'marking absolutely everything' and using numbers to quantify student work. Undoubtedly my experiences as a student who was assessed in this way contributed to the power of the practice. The regulations of the institution itself demanded that I provide report cards to parents that outlined student achievement in terms of letter grades. I was accountable to my school administrator, my school district and the Ministry of Education. Students learn to depend on letter grades as is evidenced the common refrains of, 'Is this for marks? Will this be on the test? Do we have to know this?' Parents depend upon grades as a common language that tells them how their children are performing in school. The power that holds grading practices in place is not a 'top down' power. It is a practice that is enmeshed in tradition and regulation. It is an element of the very fabric of the institution of school as it was conceptualized and created through modernity.

I comfort myself with the realization that "by knowing the basis of modern institutions one knows the constraints they impose and at the same time one can begin to escape those constraints and make sense of the efforts of our contemporaries to do the same thing" (Cooper, 1981, p. 4). Although this reading of Foucault emphasizes the restrictions imposed upon us, his musings are in many ways an expression of freedom. If I were to view myself as teacher strictly as an object conditioned by the whole, I would be unable to step back from my situation and seek

the gaps between my conditioning and the possible (Greene, 1995). Considering these narratives from a Foucauldian perspective allowed me to examine the historicity of our grading practices, personally and institutionally, and to recognize the relationships of power that allow traditional grading practices to persist. As the teacher who struggled over those first reports, I began to seek ways to escape the constraints imposed by the web of power relations that required me to assign letter grades to student learning. When Schrag asks, *Why Foucault Now?*, one can answer that Foucault enables us to think differently about why we do the things we do, and “as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible” (1999, p. 382).

Seeking Foucault in the First Reports Narrative: A Poetic Representation

A closer examination of the First Reports narrative reveals an embedded social reality that is distinctly Foucauldian. The following words and phrases stand out as glaringly obvious markers of the institution, so I have removed them from within their original context in order to reveal the Foucauldian traces more explicitly.

The empty desks in the darkened classroom are arranged in neat rows

Teacher's role – Construct the Student as subject

Validity of my judgement, science of test construction

Accurate scoring

The Bell curve

Mark absolutely everything

The row of marks

Black and red numbers

The numbers in the book don't lie

Efforts have earned them their grades

The numbers in the book don't lie, she's earned these marks

This student is below average

52% in Math, 55% in Language Arts, 48% in Social Studies.

C-, D and F

The numbers in the book don't lie

Teacher's role – Enact the power

Gathering evidence

Mark absolutely everything

I've created and marked examinations

I add and average with my calculator

I have the data required to justify my grades

Calculating and averaging scores in my record book,

Review the evidence

Responsibility

Writing the report cards.

Entering marks on the official form.

I write the marks..... forced to record C-, D and F

I have to fail her

Create a Hierarchy: Teacher and Students in the Network of Power

Top of my class

Teacher

Below average

Student

Dismal scores

Set apart, Stood out, Shunned

Withdrawn, Never invited, Her face was often hidden

Refusal of others to acknowledge her presence

Bring down the marks

The top students

Adolescence: Resisting the Judgments of Others

*At some point in our lives, we actively
resist the right of others to determine our value for us.*

After considering the narratives of report card moments, I invite the reader to delve a little more deeply into the school experiences of the participants and myself. What follows is a layering of the narratives. A progression that started with the creation and receiving of report cards is followed by a peeling away of the layers of school experience that begin with our outermost layer –the ‘shell’ that each of us tried to create to protect ourselves from the effects of the judgments of others in high school. What stands out for me as I consider these narratives is the resistant nature of high school students. High school appears to be a time when each of us sought to be free of the influences of grades and measurement although we accomplished it in different ways. When I consider the idea of self as student resisting or embodying dominant discourses, the high school students in these narratives are actively involved in resisting messages about failure, success and achievement.

During the last two years of high school, I decided that I didn’t care about marks anymore, which was a big change from my earlier attitudes toward school and grades. I had always been very focused on gaining approval from my teachers and my parents and I received high grades with very little effort. After grade 10, I stopped seeking their approval, and stopped caring about my grades. As this next story illustrates, I was never completely able to separate myself from that need for approval or that caring.

Paige: Playing the Game

I'm sitting in the gymnasium, sweating along with 350 other excited teenagers awaiting the call of my name. We're packed in rows on folding metal chairs. My head swims with the scents of perfume, hairspray, body odour and traces of nicotine from the cigarette Sarah and I shared behind the school before rushing back to join the line of our capped and gowned classmates. When my name is called, I'll walk along my row and up on to the stage to receive my high school diploma and then I'm out of here. Before we get to the listing of names, we are forced to endure a series of motivational speeches by the Principal, the Valedictorian, the Mayor, and my Dad, the Superintendent. They speak of our bright futures, the challenges ahead, and their pride in the graduating class of 1980. Then they begin to announce the awards and scholarships.

I tune out. The awards mean nothing to me this year. After being a straight 'A' student all the way to grade 10, I've bowed out of the whole achievement game in the last two years of high school. I don't need a teacher to decide how good I am. I can decide that for myself. I heard a rumour that you needed a C+ average to get into university and that's exactly what I've got. A C+ average. Just in case. I have fine-tuned the marks game to the narrowest degree of margins. I never write a paper until the night before it's due. I never study for tests until the hour before the exam. It just doesn't matter to me anymore.

Denise's name is called out. She's won a \$1,000.00 scholarship. I lean over and whisper to Sarah, "Like that's a surprise. She's a total suck."

"No kidding!" is the reply. "Remember that time in English class when we were all fooling around and Ms. Morris complained that no one was listening to her? Denise put up her hand and called out, "I'm listening to you Ms. Morris!"

“Unbelievable. Talk about a geek!”

Mike gets the next scholarship. “You gotta wonder what these people do for fun. Do they even have a life?”

“Not likely. Have you ever seen them at a party? They wouldn’t know what to do with themselves!”

“Mind you, \$1000.00 would be nice. I didn’t know they were going to be handing out money!”

“You have to spend it on university, so they can keep it. You think I’m going anywhere near school again? I’m out of here!”

The next hour goes on like this. Names are called; students and parents beam, hugs and handshakes and applause are repeated for everyone. By the end, Denise has won 3 scholarships. Sarah and I have spent the whole time whispering and muttering to each other about how embarrassing it would be to be them, how useless it is to put effort into school, how meaningless good marks are, how rockin’ the party tonight is going to be.

Although Sarah and I are having a great time, a disturbing thought has entered my mind. It could have been me up there. As much as I’m laughing at them, I know inside that I’m as capable as they are. There’s my Dad, sitting up on the stage, the Superintendent for God’s sake, and I haven’t done one thing to make him proud. Wouldn’t it have been nice for him to be able to beam and smile and hug his daughter for winning a scholarship? I can hardly look at him.

I twist in my seat to look for my Mom. I give her a little wave and she smiles and nods her head back. Is she thinking the same thing? Is she wondering where she went wrong?

Finally they start calling out the long list of names for the diplomas. We move along our rows, up the stairs, and across the stage, receiving handshakes and diplomas

from the assembled dignitaries, one after another. When I get to my Dad, I'm suddenly shaky and tearful. I reach out and hug him, in front of the whole school, and continue across the stage. I fight to suppress the choking feeling my tears bring. By the time I've gotten back to my seat, I've taken enough deep breaths to bring me back to normal.

As I flop down in the chair next to Sarah again I whisper, "Talk about boring. Let's get the hell out of here!"

At first glance, I thought this story was about an attempt to assert my independence from adult evaluations of my abilities and of me. I had consciously decided that I didn't care about grades anymore, and felt that I was adult and 'cool' as a result. Reliving that moment and thinking about it more deeply helped me to understand that even when I thought I had made a decision to stop seeking the approval of my teachers through my achievement in school, I was never really free of my need for approval. Feelings of regret flooded over me as I sat and listened to others receiving commendations that could have been mine. I wondered if I had irreparably damaged my parents' love for me and sought to claim it back through my public display of affection.

Sharing and discussing this story with the participants helped me to see it in another light. The ways they talked about not caring about grades helped me to realize that I was just pretending not to care. If I hadn't cared, why would I have bothered getting the C+ average I needed for university? What I see now is that I knew enough about how to achieve in school that I could *choose* the grade level I wanted. I never recognized my privilege until I considered the lack of control over achievement that was experienced by others. Through my positioning as 'successful student', I had control over access to the social goods of the institution and could choose whether to accept or reject them. In

contrast, Amber had no such choice. She had no control over her ability to succeed, and compensated for this lack of control by controlling what she could – the outer shell that concealed what was underneath.

Amber: Building my shell

I had a lot of great strategies to make myself late in high school. I just didn't want to go. Really. I mean even for P.E. I used to write notes and sign them with my Mom's handwriting. I was a perfectionist with my outfits, hair and makeup. My socks, pants, underwear - everything had to be just right. I was an expert at applying just the right amount of foundation, mascara, and purple or blue eye shadow. Before school, I'd lock myself in the bathroom where I'd be curling my hair, losing myself in creating each perfect curl, then hairspray...curl, spray, curl, spray, curl, spray....dreaming of hairdressing instead of high school...when a curl would screw up I would fly into a rage and kick holes in the wall or I'd take my curling iron and beat the living snot out of the windowsill in the bathroom. It had dints and holes all through it. My Mom would be screeching outside the bathroom door, "Amber, get a move on! This year, not next year! Get your butt out the door!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going!"

I'd eventually saunter into class, grab a chair, flip it around backwards and park myself with an attitude of, "All right. I'm here. I'm late. What the hell are you gonna do about it?" On the outside, I portrayed innocence and power at the same time. I'd acted out enough that the kids and the teachers respected me. They realized I wasn't going to put up with anything. I got to be very outspoken and spoke up for my rights. You wanted to present yourself as perfect all the time, because if you showed any little flaw, kids would take that and torment you or pick on you about it. I knew that there were flaws that I wasn't able to perform like every other student so

that's why I did the perfectionist thing. I think if you present one face to the world that's what they see rather than what's really underneath.

The teacher would say, "Where's your homework?" and I'd say things like, "Oh my goldfish ate it." When it came to exams, if I didn't know the answer I would just write, "I haven't got a clue."

If I was mad, people would know it, they could sense the anger. I remember in one class, there was this kid who had a crush on me. He was always slamming his books down on the floor, making everyone jump, and the teacher couldn't control it. One day I got up, marched across the class and cuffed him, hard, across the back of the head. The rest of the class cheered and the teacher thanked me.

*The teachers' approach to helping me with schoolwork rarely changed...day after day I sat there not getting it and no one was helping me **to** get it. At the same time I was angry at myself for the fact that I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me and why couldn't I get it? The same messages were repeated again and again by my teachers and in my report cards. Work harder! Apply yourself! Stop fiddling around!*

As the grade levels went up it seemed to get a bit better but I still didn't apply myself because there were so many things I didn't understand. I really had trouble staying focused. My mom took me in and they did some questions and stuff but they never really diagnosed me. What they said was, "We don't usually see what you have in girls, we see it in boys." I don't know what that was, just what I have, or the way I act, I don't know. It's almost like a building block was missing. I can take information about things in but I have a lot of trouble turning it around and putting it back out. It's like a key component is missing - you feel something is not there.

I sometimes think about what's been drilled into us since we were young – that everybody has to compete. There are these groups – you know, like the bird groups? The Buzzards are here and the Bluebirds are there because they're doing better and you're always sitting there thinking, "Why can't I be like that?" It's funny the fact that those 'birds' that were highest in the class are usually the druggies or whatever nowadays because they just can't handle the fact they don't have the attention they had in school. You know a lot of the popular kids just got kind of messed up and went into bad crowds. It's the rebels who usually made something of themselves.

By the time I got to Grade 10, I was getting it sometimes but other things were more important than school. There was really no interest. I had passed Essentials English surprisingly with a B, but failed everything else. I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere, and the humiliation of actually being in school when I was 20? I was definitely not interested in doing that. "I might as well get out," I said to my Mom. "I'm not going anywhere." She gave me a choice – I could either get a job or go to hairdressing school.

Amber used her 'tough girl' exterior and her perfect appearance to create a shell to try and protect her from the judgments of others. The face she presented to the world allowed her to cover the flaws she felt she possessed – as she sat there "not getting it" she tested the power of teachers and her peers to point out otherwise. Saying "the goldfish ate it" was a lot easier than admitting that she was unable to do her homework. Even her admission of "I haven't got a clue" was presented as a challenge. She felt that she had earned the respect of teachers and peers by her smart remarks and aggressive actions.

Although Amber had a shell, it was a brittle one that threatened to crumble under pressure; the anger she felt at herself and others burst out in places like the bathroom. Amber got tough, but when she realized that she would still be in high school at the age of 20 because of her

failing grades, the prospect of the humiliation that would accompany that experience was too much for her to cover up. She eventually made the decision to get out and go to hairdressing school instead.

Anger emerges as a predominant emotion in Shawn's high school experience as well. Anger offered him a sort of protection from the labels that he heard being applied to him. His voice sounds like a shout, an angry tirade, yet for all his noise and anger and aggression, he is very clear about not being asked and not being heard. He didn't have a voice.

Shawn: They already knew all about me

When I went from Grade 7 to Grade 8 it was the same old crap. Here's the thing that pisses me off. I could have turned my life around between Grade 7 and Grade 8; I could have changed right around. Grade 8 could have been a fresh start like it is for other kids, but the elementary already gave the high school my pamphlets and everything so they pretty much said, "Don't try to help this kid. Just kind of put him in the Learning Center and don't do much with him." They gave me a couple normal classes, but the teachers figured they already knew that I was something else. Like in English, the teacher had my brother before me, and he's a genius, so he was pretty disappointed to see me coming. He said to me, "You're just going to be another speed bump in life. A statistic."

*Nobody ever asked me what I wanted personally. If the teacher asked me what I wanted and what I needed it would be a different story. Here's what they could have done. If a teacher sat down and said, "Well this is what you **were** like and this is what the teacher said about you but now I'm a **different** teacher in a **different** school, so now I'm going to approach it in a different way." But that never happened. They just pushed me through school.*

What they didn't know is what I was feeling. They knew what the other teachers were feeling, but they didn't bother to ask me anything. They didn't care to bother to ask me anything. You can never really know what a person is like unless you sit down and talk with them.

Here's what I have to say about that; you can never judge a book by its cover but the teachers have already read the book and passed it on to somebody else instead of actually asking you what it's like. So for me it was more of me going in with the attitude of, "Okay whatever. They already think I'm a speed bump. So you want me to be like this I'll be like this. If you call me a statistic and a speed bump then I'm going to be a statistic." They already made their minds up before I ever got to the school.

My buddy and I made up this game to see how quick I could get kicked out of class. I'd walk in, sit down, and right away the teacher would say, "Get out your books!"

I'd answer back, "What the (&^ \% for?"*

Right away I'd get yelled at, "You're out!"

"Nice!" I'd think to myself on the way out as my friend flashed 10 fingers. "Out in ten seconds!"

I changed schools again after that. I was sent to a private Christian school because my parents figured they had better teaching there, but it was the same story. I can remember the Principal; he labelled me right away because I wasn't dressed like the rest of the kids from rich families. I wasn't having anything to do with the suits and ties – I was all baggy jeans and a T-shirt, hat on backwards, eyes red. I just didn't care. The first thing he said to me was, "You're a thug. You're a gangster."

They had no idea what I had. They didn't understand my disabilities or how my anger was. I didn't care. No hope, no ambition, no nothing. When I tried to learn in class, they

*wouldn't teach anything. I could probably have done way better; I guarantee it would have been way better if the teacher was willing to teach instead of just **pretending** to teach. I was super interested in history, like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and here I was in class and I'm thinking "How can you call yourself a teacher when you don't teach? All you do is say, "Go to page 58 and go." "Go!" is not teaching, that's just pointing you in a direction. I'd complain and they'd be like, "You're getting out of control, you're loud, you're bad. Get out of here!" Sitting down with the student and struggling with the student is what I call a teacher. To go through the same thing that the student with the pain is going through then that's a teacher.*

I spent most of my time at that school just wandering the halls while the other kids were in class. They never really sat down and helped. I just kind of got pushed through. For the last two months, I pretty much didn't do anything. Then when it came to graduation it was hilarious. They called me in and said, "Here, we have this diploma for you." They wrote my name on the diploma by hand and said, "We're going to let you walk across the stage and wear the gown, but you're not really graduating." So I'm thinking, "What? This isn't a diploma! It's just somebody writing on a piece of paper." A diploma's a piece of paper, it doesn't mean shit.

I did not care a damn thing seeing those people on stage. I went because I knew there was a party afterwards. I went and got all drunk and ruined everybody's day. I knew the diploma didn't mean anything so that was the fun part of my time was ruining everybody else's time.

I sense a lingering regret at the possibility that was wasted between elementary school and high school for Shawn. As he discussed the transition between schools, he hinted at a seed of hope that stirred within him as he moved toward a 'fresh start' with new teachers in a new school, but it was a very fragile one that disappeared once he realized the school had already made up their minds about him before he arrived.

Shawn's anger shouts out of this story and I am powerfully affected by his recollection of the labels 'Thug'... 'Gangster'... 'Statistic'... 'Speed bump' that were applied to him. In some ways Shawn took up those labels and enacted them when he dressed in his baggie pants, hat on backward, and when he defied the teachers and dared them to kick him out of class. He knew he was "a book that had already been read" and it sounds like he didn't expend much effort trying to prove otherwise. Taking on the labels and enacting them was a way of taking control of and resisting the judgments of others. It stripped the labels of their power and the ability of others to wield them as weapons against him.

Shawn's perspective on the artificial structures of high school strikes me as critically insightful. I have witnessed many classes that begin with variations of "turn to pg. 58 and go" and he's right, that's not teaching, it's pretending to teach. His school career culminated with the ultimate artifice – the fake diploma that he saw right through. He resisted the school's attempts to belatedly offer him acceptance and approval through the diploma by "ruining everyone else's time."

Although I doubt that I was as critically aware at that age, I think that I sensed the artifice in the structures of school – especially the grades – and sought to mock them by trying not to care, but I wonder if Shawn was more free of grades than I was. He went all out in his campaign of 'not caring' and punished those around him – the teachers, the kids and the Principal. On the other hand, his assertions of 'not caring' are so intense that I suspect they betray a level of caring that is much deeper than he likes to admit.

Hannah's attempts to resist the judgments of others were less overt than Amber or Shawn's, but resistance still emerges as a feature of her high school experience. Anger resides

within this narrative as well. As she described it, ‘they’ decided she should be in Life Skills³, so she was trapped in an environment where she felt she didn’t belong. Hannah was offered support for her learning, but she ended up frustrated by the over-abundance of help that was offered to her. She resisted this by finding ways to escape and by seeking to create her own educational experience.

Hannah: Give me a break!

When I got to high school they decided I should be in Life Skills. I got to do a lot of regular classes and some Life Skills classes. I know I knew more things than the Life Skills kids in there. There were a lot of times when I was getting so frustrated. It was just so basic that, I mean a 2 year old, well; about grade 2 could do the things we did in Life Skills. I loved Science, especially Biology, and I would go to used book stores and buy these Biology textbooks and take them to school and read them. I remember a teacher’s aide that came in while I was reading a biology text book. She asked me, “Do you understand everything you’re reading in this?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Why are you here in Life Skills then?” she wondered.

“Exactly!” I said. She was someone who finally said what I was sitting there thinking in that Life Skills room, that I didn’t belong there.

*When I went to the regular classes, the teacher’s aides would be there with me. Sometimes there were so many helpers it was just annoying. I wanted to shout, “Just leave me alone!” All these helpers buzzing around, but never once did they ask me what I needed, and sometimes they just took over. I remember one Socials class when there were **two** helpers there*

³ Life Skills refers to a specialized program that exists in most high schools in British Columbia for students with significant developmental delays.

just for me! I hated Social Studies. They weren't even helping the other kids, and helping me usually meant they would just do it for me. I couldn't even think for myself. I seriously wanted to yell at them, "Get away from me!" so I would go to the bathroom and hide. I remember in Sewing I asked the teacher's aide for help once and she said, "Let me do it!" and she took it and did it for me!

*I just wish... I really wish that someone would have given me the help I **needed**. I wish that someone had asked **me** what I wanted or needed. I wish they realized and would help me do things that would help me to get up to the level that I needed to be at.*

Hannah was told by others that she belonged in a Life Skills program and that she wasn't capable of academic work, but she was desperate for the opportunity to think for herself.

She resisted the categorization that was applied to her by buying her own textbooks at second-hand book stores and made a point of reading them in her Life Skills classroom. What stands out as I consider this story is the voice that Hannah was struggling to find and use. She sat there, frustrated, in Life Skills, reading a Biology textbook or in 'regular classes' with helpers buzzing around her, but feels that she was never asked for her perspective on her education. Was she waiting for someone to notice? I'm struck by the messages we receive from those who try to help too much. Is "Let me do it for you!" any better than the "Try harder!" messages that Amber received? Neither message offers any real assistance, and I am left wondering when and how any *real* support was offered to students like Hannah and Amber.

Hannah felt her frustration, and occasionally spoke it, but often used a trip to the bathroom as her escape. Escape was a key factor in Andrew's high school experiences as well. He used this tactic in contradictory ways. Andrew resisted the judgments of his parents by escaping from them into school, and resisted the judgments of peers and teachers in high school

by avoiding school altogether. When he wasn't escaping his family by going to school, he was escaping school.

Andrew: Someone Else's Rules

By the time I got to high school, I really didn't want to be there. I got really good at skipping school. I could forge my mother's signature and even fake her voice on the telephone. In grade 9, I was skipping math a lot – I hated the teacher and missed a lot of classes. The principal finally called my Mom in to talk to her about my failing grades and she found out how many classes I had missed. She was so impressed with my ingenuity she made a deal with me. She said if I attended all my other classes I could skip school one day every other week and go skiing. It was around this time that my Mom went nuts and my Dad buggered off. When you're a kid dealing with that kind of stuff it doesn't matter who you are, you're not going to do well.

The whole time I felt like I was being educated according to someone else's rules. It was like walking into a prison. It was like walking into a jailhouse where a teacher is holding a stick over your head. I mean teachers do a hard job, but it doesn't mean you have to bow to them, but when you're a kid growing up, that's what it feels like. You have to bow to their authority.

I might have had successful moments but I don't remember ever feeling successful. If you ask me to define a successful kid, it would be the kid who everyone likes. He gets decent grades, the teacher loves him, he doesn't get beat up or annoyed or bothered by other people. I never enjoyed going to school. I never looked forward to it. The only time I did was when I saw it as an escape from my family.

It is possible that avoiding school provided Andrew with a means of resisting the judgments of others. When Andrew defined a successful kid – the kid everyone likes, who is loved by the teacher, who gets good grades and doesn't get 'beat up' by other people, was he

describing the things he needed to escape from? Being away from school gave him an opportunity to avoid the consequences of being an ‘unsuccessful’ kid. Andrew implies that unsuccessful kids got bad grades, were hated by the teacher, and got beat up and annoyed and bothered by other people. He came to think of high school as a jail, and teachers as the jailers. Echoes of Foucault’s (1977) analysis of institutions are eerily represented in this narrative. In Andrew’s context, escape takes on connotations of survival.

When I contrast all of the participants’ experiences in high school with my own, I discern some significant differences. I am reminded of my ability to control my achievement in school. I could manipulate my marks while pretending to be someone who didn’t care about grades. They seemed to have little control over their academic abilities. Some were left feeling like high school was a prison, while for me it was a game. My ability to be successful in school also offered me access to the social goods that accompany achievement. I had the power to reject membership in the top ranks in school – the ranks which Shawn referred to as the ‘chess club members’ and the ‘Grade A kids’, Andrew referred to as the ‘successful kids’, Amber referred to as the ‘Bluebirds’ and the ‘popular kids’ and Hannah referred to as the ‘other kids’ in the ‘regular classes’. These positions in the top ranks and on the inside were seen clearly from the positioning of these participants who were positioned on the outside and at the bottom.

In addition to the contrasts, I also see striking similarities in the ways the participants and I tried to assert our independence by resisting the power of the evaluative messages we received in school. In various ways we all saw school as something we needed to be protected from.

Beginning to wonder...

As we begin to define ourselves as individuals we begin to wonder about the right of teachers to define us.

When I looked beneath the ‘outer layer’ represented by our high school experiences, I found stories of pre-adolescents who experienced school in a way that is different, though not entirely distinct, from the later years. For the participants and me, these were our ‘middle years’ in school, the difficult-to-define period between primary school and high school. We found *ourselves* difficult to define. We were just beginning to make decisions about whether to embrace or resist the judgments of others. We were beginning to wonder about who we were and to wonder about the wisdom of teachers whose messages defined us. We were becoming aware of the categories we were told we belonged in and beginning to question them. We were also beginning to become more aware of our classmates, of our positioning within the class along the hierarchy of success or failure and of the patterns of power and powerlessness that placed us there. As we became aware of power, some of us sought to obtain it through subversion, stealing, cheating, sneaking and aggression.

Paige: I got away with it

I clearly remember when I first began to doubt the integrity of teachers – when ‘they’ as a species fell off their pedestals. Until my Grade 6 year, I worshipped teachers as beings larger than life. They were kindly, benevolent adults who cared about me. In Grade 6, the teacher became more human with human characteristics like warts and smells. I realized that teachers have faults. I learned to criticize my teacher. My classmates and I looked at him with such disdain as he strutted around the classroom, hands behind his back, talking endlessly, bobbing

his head like a chicken. From our perspective he was an irritating buffoon – he had bad hair, bad clothes and bad breath.

I remember that we had to do an enormous report on a country that year and I chose Finland. Initially, I got caught up in imagining the fjords and diligently worked on seeking and recording fascinating facts about Finland, but eventually I either ran out of time or interest. At the last minute I decided to create a really nice table of contents and to skip several sections in the middle of the report, then I handed it in for marking. I suppose my rationale was that I could just pretend that I had forgotten to include the sections and supply them later, if asked. To my shock and relief, he didn't even notice! I received an excellent mark on the project, and there was no mention of the missing sections. In spite of my relief, the experience opened up a chasm of doubt in the authority and authenticity of teachers in my mind. Did I initially want his approval? I don't remember, but I do remember that he didn't have mine.

My experience with this teacher and this project revealed the surprising reality of 'teachers as humans' for me. In my social world, teachers became not only human, but also imperfect and flawed. In retrospect I see this as the beginning of the process that led me to disengage from teacher approval in my high school years. I began to wonder if the marks that defined me were authentic; it was like seeing the little old man behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz (1939). A teacher was no longer all-powerful; a mark was no longer an absolute measurement of me.

My tentative rebellion – excluding elements of my report – indicated an emerging willingness to test the limits of the system, but it is evident that I still wanted the good grades that I was used to getting. I certainly never bothered to inform the teacher of his mistake, which would have threatened my academic standing. I was beginning to realize that there were rewards

that went along with being a successful student, and I seemed to be able to be successful even without deserving it. I was, as Stiggins (2007) refers to it, a student on a winning streak.

I wonder if by this point in my school career I had decided that I deserved my position as successful student as a given rather than as an outcome of hard work. This scenario is also a reflection of the ‘bell curve thinking’ that dominates positivist assessment environments. It is very possible that the teacher had already placed me in my position at the top of the hierarchy, to the right of the bell curve, and didn’t bother to seek confirmation of my learning by closely examining my work. Perhaps I was a ‘book that had already been read’ as much as Shawn was.

The stories of the participants convey a very different reality than mine. They too were beginning to wonder about the authenticity of teachers while being very aware of their positioning at the bottom of classroom hierarchies of success and failure. The first two participant narratives in this section offer us insight into Amber’s middle year experiences. In the narrative Seeking Power, she had already failed one grade, and was a year older than the other students in her class. In Finding Power, she was in grade 5, and two years ‘behind’ her peers. She was a student on a losing streak (Stiggins, 2007). Amber initially expressed her resistance and wondering through small misdeeds such as stealing, and then progressed to increasingly aggressive actions aimed at gaining power for herself.

Amber: Seeking Power

In Grade 3 I was a shy quiet kid with a bad haircut and big ugly boy glasses. My Grade 3 teacher? She was a yeller. I felt bewildered, left behind and picked on. I couldn’t read, but because I was quiet, a lot of the teachers would like to single me out and ask me the answer. When you give the wrong answer everybody laughs - well of course then you don’t want to answer anymore. A lot of it was that I didn’t understand. I know now that I’m a visual learner so

*it's harder if somebody's telling me," Yap-yap-yap-yap-yap." It just sounds like "Yap-yap-yap." If I'm **shown** what to do I learn it, and I don't remember that ever happening back then.*

I was often left inside to work while the rest went out to play. I started to steal from the other kids. I remember stealing treats from kids' lunches around Halloween, but I would steal anything, you name it - a sparkly pen, a sticker, or a pencil - and hide it in my desk or bag. It gave me sense of power to have that secret knowledge. I think I was trying to get somebody to notice. I was saying, "Look! I need help. I'm trying to speak up and I'm saying I need help." Stealing was also the only thing that gave me a feeling of success in school. The main successful moments I had was when I stole something and didn't get caught and I could say, "Ha ha. I've got one over on you!"

Day after day, the teacher would gather up all the workbook pages I hadn't finished, staple them together, and send them home with me. I remember taking math home a few times and asking for help. My mom would say, "I don't understand that shit! Don't ask me!"

I would sit down with my Dad and it would be, "Blah, blah, blah, blah. Do you understand? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

I would be pretending to get it, and going, "Mhmm, yup, yup uhuh."

If you admitted you weren't getting it and tried to get him to explain, he'd get all impatient and just, "Tpphhhhhttt!" at me. As you were trying to get it, he was ticked off that you weren't getting it. Back at school I would get comments like, "What would your Mother say if she knew you didn't bring your homework back?" I knew she wouldn't care. I eventually realized there was no point. I didn't understand what to do anyways. There was field full of bushes across from my house - I would just chuck the homework in there on my way home and would get away with it if my brother wasn't watching.

Amber's perception of her positioning is revealed as she recalls being singled out, giving the wrong answers, and being laughed at by 'everybody'. She talks about the opportunities for stealing that were available because 'the rest' were sent out to play while she was left inside to work. She knew that she needed help, and this was the only way she could think of to ask for it. The teacher's assumption that she would get help from home resulted in further frustration and helplessness. Her early attempts to seek help from her parents didn't change the situation at all. She realized early on that there was little to be gained by struggling through unfinished schoolwork and 'chucked it' in the bushes. She began to realize that there was no point in attempting the homework that the teacher sent home.

Amber's stealing emerged as a way of gaining control over something in her classroom life. It's almost as though she resented the other students for the secret powers they had – power over the ability to read and learn – and she was seeking a power of her own in the only way she could think of.

Amber: Finding Power

It took me two years to pass grade 1 and another two to pass grade 4. By that time I was a frustrated and angry child. Nothing I did seemed to be right, you know? I would do everything I could think of to make myself late for school. I'd be dawdling away at home and my Mom would be shouting outside the bathroom door, "It's almost 8:30! Get a move on! Come on Amber! Chrissy is ready to drag you down the road to school!" My sister Chrissy was five years younger than me, and it was my job to walk her. So down the road to school I'd go, dragging my feet, my sister whining about being late. I'd pick on her on the way there. It made me feel better.

On lots of days I was kept after school and I would be told, "You're not applying yourself!" The rest was just, "Yap, yap, yap, yap, yap." I sometimes walked home from school

*with one girl, but her Mom wouldn't let her play with me after a while, and I think it's because I didn't get good grades. **She** was a success; she was a stuck up snob. Kids like her would get it from me after school on the days I wasn't kept behind. I got into cruising the neighbourhood on my mini ten-speed with a slingshot. I was a really good shot. I just did that for power. Even though I wasn't going to do anything I would be thinking, "I can make this kid run!"*

This was when I really started to be defiant towards teachers. I remember in Grade 5, I left my coat on one day and the teacher decided to make a big deal of it. "Take your coat off," he said.

"No, I'm cold".

"Do as you're told."

"NO!"

"Fine then, I'm going to take your desk away!"

"No problem, I'll just sit here." And I did. I sat through that whole class with my arms folded over my chest, and no desk. One day I actually punched a kid – he heard me say something about him and he took it the wrong way, so he pushed me from behind. I just turned around and decked him. When you feel you have no power there comes a point in your life where you have to take control and you have to feel power because you become a victim.

When Amber was kept behind after school and told by her teachers that she wasn't 'applying herself' all she heard was, "Yap, yap, yap." She was unable to work out what 'apply yourself' actually meant in terms of her academic success. Messages to 'apply herself' remain as the only way she remembers that teachers attempted to support her learning. This led her to question the right of her teachers to tell her anything, even things as small as, "Take off your coat." She was aware of her position on the continuum of success and failure, and responded to it

by going after ‘successful’ kids, kids like the ‘stuck-up snob’ who weren’t allowed to play with her. Amber recognized inequity in her treatment at school – she felt like a victim and fought back to gain a feeling of personal power.

Shawn expressed a similar experience of feeling that he didn’t ‘belong’ with the successful kids and a similar response to his positioning, which was attack. After losing the teacher who tried to understand him, and the principal who was ‘the only one that really cared’, he lost the sense that anyone cared. His wondering led him to question his school’s attempts to categorize him. He recalled that sometimes he ‘tried his hardest’ but his hardest was never good enough. He felt that teachers were more worried about kids with their ‘heads on straight’ than kids ‘like him’.

Shawn: I Tried my Hardest and my Hardest Wasn’t Good Enough

There were one or two good things in elementary school. This one teacher, Mrs. T., she was the type to try and understand kids like us. There was my principal too, Mr. Jerry. He pulled tooth and nail for me. He kept me in that school. He was the only one that really cared. He would bring me to the office and sit me down and talk to me and learn me. He tried to understand me. He was the main reason I got through school. After he passed away I kind of just didn’t care anymore and teachers didn’t care anymore.

If I think about myself as a student then, this is what I remember. I tried my hardest. I remember trying my hardest on some of the math tests and spelling tests and walking away thinking that I did good then the next day looking at the card. It would say things like Incomplete, Fail, Not Good Enough, Try Harder. You’re sitting there going, “Try harder? What the hell does that mean? Try harder when I’ve already tried my hardest and my hardest is apparently not good enough? So I’m done trying my hardest and I’ll just slack off and do

nothing. I'll do what I want to do." And that's what I did. I was so mad that I couldn't do as good as I tried even though I tried my hardest and yet my hardest wasn't good enough so I just didn't care anymore. I didn't pay attention, didn't do any work so they kicked me out of that class.

Every year they kept pulling me out of class, and kicking me out of class until in Grade 7 they put me in another class with a bunch of kids like me. They put us in this small room together and the teachers pretty much did absolutely nothing. They played music and said we were all special and all that crap and then no matter what we did we wouldn't get more grades. We'd just get stickers and good for efforts. So I just started to bust out – like I broke into the school, stole the Christmas lights and smashed them and smoked a bunch of pot. I just hung out, did what I wanted. They just didn't care. They told me that I probably wasn't going to be anything, that I wasn't going to go into grade 8 and that I just might as well like give up pretty much right now. They were more worried about kids with their head on straight and not the kids that were confused by the littlest questions so that really pissed me off and made me feel like a pile of crap.

I enjoyed getting back at the Grade A kids. I beat them up, stole their books, laughed at them, put gum in their hair. I hated them with a passion because they were the ones banging on us for not being as smart. They were the ones making fun of us and we got back at them for making fun of us because we're not as smart as them. We got them back. That was more satisfying than getting an A+.

It sounds like Shawn responded well to the Principal that tried to 'learn him' but he rejected the school's attempts to create a space for him, such as the special class with no grades and only 'stickers and good for efforts' and looked for ways to punish the school such as when he stole and smashed the Christmas lights.

There were moments when Shawn felt that he had ‘tried his hardest’ on some of the tests, and he remembered the ‘card’ that told him the results of tests in school which said “Incomplete, Fail, Not Good Enough, Try Harder.” In other words, he never knew whether he had done well or not until the results were given to him. He remembers “...walking away thinking that I did good then the next day looking at the card...” and being told to try harder. He learned to see ‘try harder’ as an empty directive and questioned the value of trying harder when ‘trying’ was not what was needed, if ‘trying’ meant doing more of the same. He sought to take control of his achievement by doing nothing at all. At least by doing nothing he was doing what *he* wanted to do.

This story also reveals that Shawn’s categorization on the outside of success was initiated early in school when he was told that he “probably wasn’t going to be anything” and that he “might as well give up” rather than go to grade 8. In spite of this, Shawn’s high school story held an indication that he resisted taking up this message as he hoped for a different outcome when he transitioned to grade 8 – a hope that was never realized. Shawn’s perception of his position on the outside was revealed when he talked about the ‘Grade A’ kids. He punished them for their success in school and replaced achievement satisfaction with the satisfaction of revenge.⁴

The experience of hoping to do well, trying his hardest, then being told to try harder stands out in Andrew’s narrative from his middle years as well. He also had to wait for the ‘official’ evaluation from the teacher before he knew whether he had succeeded or not; subsequently, his father accepted the teacher’s judgment without question. This story of an early

⁴ It is interesting that Shawn spoke of his revenge using plural rather than singular terms in this narrative. He said, “I hated them with a passion because they were the ones banging on us for not being as smart” as if he realized that he belonged in a category of more than one. As he shared this story, he may have been referring to his co-participants in the study, or to the other kids in his ‘special class’. Interestingly, his co-participant, Amber, was in complete agreement with him on this point and was nodding her head while he spoke.

experience with failure reveals Andrew's inability to control his lack of achievement any better than Shawn could. He may have tried his hardest, but the reward for this trying could only come from the teacher, and even trying and succeeding wasn't good enough in this instance. When he tentatively questioned the judgment of the teacher, the effort was too late to have much of an impact on his belief about himself.

Andrew: I Guess I Do Suck at This

I could never really predict how I would do in school, because my marks were all over the place, but I remember one time I tried to take control of how well I would do. I think it was Grade 5 or 6 and we were doing Science classes. We had a final test and it wasn't like 100 questions, it was 30 or 40 because it was only on one part of Science and I studied like a madman. I studied every single night and for a kid that's maybe an hour but it seems like forever. Every night it would be, "I'm gonna study. Okay, stop for dinner. I'm gonna study some more." In reality I probably sat down for an hour and then went out to play with my friends but it felt like I studied for weeks on end. When I went into the test I thought I knew it all. I had hope. Everyone has hope. You hope for a better outcome but there's always that nagging doubt in the back of your mind.

*So this time I thought I knew it all and I was pretty excited to get the test back. I was holding on to this secret belief that I had finally figured it out. I remember getting the test paper back and just sitting there stunned. At the top of the paper, there was this big black letter **D**. The hope shrivelled and what I remember thinking was, "Oh, I guess I **do** suck at this." I was so worried about my dad's reaction after all that time and effort and how he would make me feel that I thought to myself, if I draw a line through the middle, I can make it look like a B. Just a little line. I took a pen, making sure I had the exact same pen as the teacher's and I slowly and*

carefully tried to draw a line through the D at the fattest point. It didn't quite look like a B...I was trembling, shaking, crying....my line was shaky and way too obvious. I tried rounding the edges on either side of my first try, the line getting thicker and thicker, my pen pressing harder and harder. Each time I sat back and looked at it, it was just worse. I tried and I tried and I couldn't do it so in some weird way I thought. "Oh, I can scratch it out and put another grade on there." I took my eraser and rubbed away at the D, trying not to rip a hole in the paper, and carefully penned in a B over top.

I got home and my Dad wasn't there. Huge amount of relief. I was just like, "Oh thank God my Mom will see this first." So I showed her the test and she saw the scratch marks and she asked me what it was about and I lied to her 'cause I was just so terrified. I said, "Oh the teacher scratched it out because he screwed up and marked it wrong." She actually believed me because at that point I don't think I'd ever lied to my Mom. Then my Dad came home. He saw the test and the mark, and he asked me why it looked scratched out. I told him the same story I had told my Mom. He took the piece of paper and held it up to the light and he could see the old grade through the new one and said, "You're lying! What really happened?"

I broke down and told him, "I studied, I studied, I studied and I just couldn't do it!"

He said, "Well that's not good enough. You're going to do this test again." He made me sit down that night for three hours to study some more. I had to miss dinner and just study. The whole time I sat there staring at the same notes I thought to myself, "I failed my Dad. No matter how hard I work, I'm never going to get it. I'm just going to fail again. Look at how hard I worked last time, and I still bombed."

I went to the teacher the next day and I told him I thought I'd done better and that my parents wanted me to take the test again. He could tell I was tearing up and about to cry. He

said, "Give me the test." He looked at it and he saw what I'd done. He said, "Why did you do that?" I told him why and he said, "Well let me look at it again." He went through the test and he realized that he had actually graded it wrong and I should have gotten a B in the first place. The funny thing is I never bothered telling my parents. Like they would have believed me anyways after I'd lied in the first place. I just didn't want to bother with it anymore.

Even when he 'tried his hardest' and the teacher admitted to making a mistake in marking his test, Andrew initially accepted his teacher's judgment as a confirmation of his lack of ability before attempting to take control of the situation by trying to change the mark. It is surprising that he never told his parents about the teacher's mistake or that he has no recollection of the teacher doing so either. This may indicate a lack of faith that the information would make any difference to his father's perception of him or to his perception of himself. He learned to doubt the integrity of teachers, but this event didn't seem to change his belief about his abilities, rather, it seemed to confirm his doubts about himself.

What is especially powerful about this story is the hope that Andrew allowed himself to feel as he wrote the Science test and waited for the results, followed by his reaction to the result. He didn't think to question the D that he received; his response was one of resigned acceptance. "Oh I guess I **do** suck at this," he thought as he looked at the score on his test. The message that he wasn't 'good enough' came from his teacher and was reinforced by the father he feared. I could picture Andrew sitting at his desk studying for the test *again*, feeling that no matter how hard he worked; the end result would be the same. Failure. I can't help but speculate about the teacher's mistake and compare it to the mistake my teacher made when he gave me a good mark I didn't deserve. Was Andrew also a 'book that had already been read'?

Hannah was the victim of preconceived assumptions about her abilities as well. This narrative emerged as Hannah's strongest memory of her school years and illustrates a time when she realized she was being treated unfairly. Her feelings about the injustice of her treatment continue to affect her as she thinks about the incident from her current perspective.

Hannah: Missing the Titanic

Isn't it funny the things you remember and the things you don't? The things you wanna forget you remember. In my Grade 5 year the memories are the worst and the best of elementary school. The best thing was that we studied the Titanic. We read a book, and got a character, and toward the end of the year we had a dance with costumes and everything. Even though we were doing those cool things, my stomach had a feeling of knots a lot of the time. My teacher, Mrs. P., well, she was not the greatest teacher. She piled extra work on me, even though she knew I had troubles. She didn't treat me the same as the other kids. When my Mom would come in to talk to her, she'd be super sweet. When it was just us kids it was a different story. My Mom could even tell. I remember her saying, "Is she always like this?" and I said, "NO, definitely not!" A little while ago I went on Facebook and they had this place for worst teachers and I put her name there. I didn't think she understood me a lot.... I just knew, well it seemed to me like she would pick on me a lot more than the other students, like giving me extra work that other students wouldn't get.

The worst memory I have of Grade 5 is when the class got to watch the Titanic movie – the good one, the one with Leonardo di Caprio. Mrs. P. decided that I wouldn't be allowed to watch the movie - that I would have to do work instead. I don't know what made her do that, but she didn't even look at my page and said no I wouldn't be watching the movie, I would be working instead. So there I sat, at the back of the room, and worked on my math sheet that I

didn't even understand. I kept sneaking glances at the movie that everyone else was relaxed and enjoying and I was so mad. Everyone else got to watch it. This is just an example of how unfair it was.

It seems like the learning assistance teachers at school tried to help. I liked going to learning assistance –it was a chance to get out of the room. I had other escapes too, mostly long slow walks to the bathroom and wandering the halls. Looking back on it I wish – I just wish the learning assistance had given me what I needed before I got to high school.

Her teacher knew she had 'troubles' and Hannah realized that she was treated differently from the other students, yet the ways she was treated differently seemed to have little to do with helping her and more to do with punishing her. Her recollection of the interview between her mother and the teacher indicate that Hannah was beginning to discern a lack of authenticity in her teacher's character – perhaps she was seeing an indication that the teacher realized she had something to conceal.

Hannah was aware that she wasn't one of the 'smart kids' but being asked to keep working on a sheet that the teacher hadn't even looked at while the others got to enjoy the privilege of watching a movie reinforced her sense that she was 'picked on' and set apart from the other kids. As she said, "She didn't treat me the same as the other kids." Looking back on it she senses that there was something she needed that 'the learning assistance' could have given her, but what she is left with is wishing.

The narratives from this period of our lives again reveal the differences between us as well as some fascinating similarities. The categories that we were sifted and sorted into begin to make themselves evident here. It appears that once our roles were established there was little we could do to move out of them. I was ranked among the high achievers and even incomplete work

was rewarded with high marks. The participants were ranked among the unsuccessful students and even their efforts to ‘try their hardest’ were never enough to shift them out of that category.

In their experience the consequences of that ranking were exclusion, humiliation and maltreatment. As we became aware of our positioning we also began to wonder about the justice of it.

The creation myths: Our prereflective landscapes

When we are young children we are trying to understand who we are. The evaluations we receive during this time are accepted as truth-messages that tell us who we are and where we belong.

A peeling away of the final layer leads us to narratives of primary school experience. We move closer to the soft core of our experiences and cast light upon what we have come to believe about ourselves through our perceptions of those experiences and the stories that we tell as we make sense of these perceptions. Although this is not phenomenological work, Merleau-Ponty (1964) speaks of perception in a way that informs my interpretation when he states that “perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us” (p.25). I have come to think of these school years as characterized by belief. We were more vulnerable then, more open to believing and accepting evaluations and taking them up as truth about ourselves. I read them with the intention of seeking the truths and values that were constituted for us in these moments.

Greene refers to our early childhood as our *prereflective* landscapes. Our presence and our perceptions of these times emerge from our situated locations within these landscapes. As she says

We are first cast into the world as embodied beings trying to understand. From particular situated locations, we open ourselves to fields of perception. Doing so, we begin to inhabit varied and always incomplete multiverses of forms, contours, structures, colours, and shadows. We become present to them as consciousnesses in the midst of them, not as outside observers; and so we see aspects and profiles but never totalities (1995, p. 73).

As consciousnesses in the midst of these prereflective landscapes our young selves perceive only aspects and profiles. In the here and now “we can only become present to them by reflecting on them” (Greene, 1995, p.73). Incomplete contours and colours populate the narratives that emerge from our reflection on these times, yet some incidents float to the surface of our perception fully formed and rich with detail.

This section is incomplete in some ways. Amber and I have powerful stories to tell of this time - stories that reveal heart-wrenching and tender moments. For us, particular incidents from primary school loom larger-than-life – perhaps amplified by the lens of time. Our narratives of these years contribute significantly to an understanding of the story of who we have become and are becoming in the present. For Hannah and Shawn, the memories are tentative and obscure – based more on feeling and impression than incident. Andrew had nothing whatsoever to say about this period of his life. Perhaps this is because I spent the most time with Amber and the least with Andrew. Perhaps it is because these stories are difficult to uncover and painful to reveal.

When I initially set about recalling evaluative experiences in school, *How Do You Spell Apple?* is the first story that emerged. It helped me to look back at my school experience and

uncover traces of my current fascination with assessment and evaluation. It also led me to some powerful insights about myself as a student.

Paige: How Do You Spell Apple?

When I think back to my elementary school years, there are only a few things I remember - naptime in kindergarten, the day I got to wear my blue velvet dress, a water evaporation experiment, sneaking tastes of dried glue from the LePages paste jar, hot dog days. The memories are pleasant ones. I'm pretty sure I loved elementary school.

I can still remember how much I loved the feel of a new pencil in Grade 2. The shiny yellow paint of the pencil would glide under my finger, interrupted by the bump bump of the gold lettering and the ridges of brass that held in the fleshy pink eraser. I loved sitting cross-legged on the carpet to listen to stories, thrusting my hand in the air to answer questions, cleaning the dusty chalk board for the teacher after school, weekly spelling tests. My favourite moments were when the teacher would invite me to stay after school and read with her. That year I loved everything about school.

When it was time for spelling tests, I would make sure my pencil was good and sharp. The teacher handed out long pieces of foolscap and I would carefully line up the numbers, 1-10, alongside the faint pink line of the margin and print my name in big letters in the top right hand corner. I left lots of room for the big round sticker I'd get when the teacher marked the test.

The tests with red check marks, stickers, 10/10, and "Good!" written at the top got posted on the Stellar Spellers! bulletin board. Spelling tests were a piece of cake; the teacher called out the words, one at a time, and I knew exactly how to put each one on paper. The words flowed out of my pencil and sat there on the page looking just right. My test made it to the bulletin board every week.

On the day of Grade 2 I remember most clearly, I was sitting at my desk writing the weekly spelling test. The words were flowing out of my pencil as the teacher called them out, “Table. There were flowers on my table this morning. Table” I wrote ‘table’ on my paper ... t- a- b- l- e. She walked back and forth at the front of the class, calling out the words in this familiar pattern; I swung my feet forward and back over the linoleum floor, swish, scuff, swish, scuff, happily writing each word down until she came to the last word. “Apple. An apple a day keeps the doctor away. Apple.” “Apple”, I repeated the word inside my head, “apple”. It wouldn’t come out of my pencil. My mind went completely blank, as if by magic. I looked for the word in there. It was gone, nowhere to be found. I was stunned, frozen, baffled. Where had it gone? I had no ideas about where to retrieve it, no strategies to try, it had simply disappeared. A flurry of butterflies in my stomach madly beat their wings. A hot flush rose up and flooded my face. I just sat there, panicking inwardly, my eyes darting about the room. I wondered if I’d throw up all over my desk. “Apple. How do you spell it? Apple. Come on! Apple?” Time stretched out. I could hear the classroom clock ticking and feel everyone’s eyes on my back. The teacher announced that it was time for gym class. A student came around to collect the spelling papers. I refused to give mine to her. A small part of my mind was saying, “Just write something. Anything!” Drowning it out was a frantic voice, shrieking, “No! It’ll be wrong!”

“I just need a little more time”, I whispered as tears pricked my eyes. She shrugged and moved on, placing the pile of white papers on the teacher’s desk. The class started lining up for gym and I was still rooted to my seat. The line-up went right down my row. Kids were standing next to me, looking at my desk, muttering about wanting to go to gym, and I still wouldn’t relinquish my test. I kept my body hunched over, the long white paper covered up, my face turned

away from the others as tears rolled down my cheeks and dripped off my chin. Some of them landed on the spelling test, puckering it up in spots, blurring the words I'd written.

One of the boys leaned over and whispered in my ear, "a-p-p-l-e for Pete's sake!" I immediately recognized it as the right spelling of the word, but I was too embarrassed to write it down right away. I snuffled and wiped my face on my sleeve. I breathed a few deep, catching breaths. Finally, slowly, reluctantly, I wrote out a-p-p-l-e, got up, and shakily placed my paper on the teacher's desk with the others. Keeping my blotchy face turned away from the class I shuffled to the end of the line-up.

We went off to gym and I got 10/10 and a sticker on my spelling test....

What a revealing experience it was for me to write, then analyze and think about, this story! It helped me to realize how much I depended upon external markers of approval to determine my self-worth in school. I was very much engaged in a quest for approval from my teacher, as my enthusiasm for participating in class and helping out after school attests to. My willingness to cheat, rather than lose my place on the Stellar Speller bulletin board reveals how far I was willing to go to maintain my status as a Stellar Speller and favoured student in the classroom. I had figured out the game rules of school and was winning, without really knowing how I was doing it; it seemed like magic to me. When I wrote tests "the words just flowed out of my pencil and sat there, looking just right." I remember feeling a curiosity about this ability at the time. I would ask my mother, "Why am I good at spelling?" Her usual response was, "It must be because you read so much." It still made no sense to me. How did I learn to read? It's another skill that appeared 'ready-made' as I try to recall obtaining it. Why, then, was I so devastated by the possibility of spelling one word wrong? It may be that I was worried that I would lose the approval and love of my teacher if I made a mistake. It is possible that I didn't trust my ability to

spell. Perhaps I thought, “If it could disappear now, is it gone forever? Could my other abilities disappear as well?”

The truth that was made evident to me at that time was that the representations I was able to produce, such as perfect scores on spelling tests, reflected my value. The stickers and stars and comments that adorned my work signalled that I was special. I was successful. My work was worthy of being displayed among the Stellar Spellers. Each test I wrote, each assignment I submitted, each correct answer I supplied gave my teachers an opportunity to reinforce that message.

As I shared the ‘Apple’ story in various settings, I was often asked about the reactions of the other students in that Grade 2 classroom. I was surprised to discover that I had very little awareness of the other students in the room aside from my belief that they were all staring at me as I struggled to figure out how to spell apple. When I began to seek alternate voices in my research, I found myself wondering about those other students. When I shared the Apple story with Hannah, her response was, “I *never* had a spelling test I got 10/10 on. Mine were *always* covered in red X’s”. My initial reaction was one of shame as I realized how privileged my experience had been. I asked her to tell me more about her primary school experiences.

Hannah: Learning Troubles

Elementary school was pretty much a fog for me... I was always so tired, but I thought it was normal. I wasn't very smart. I knew that I had learning troubles so I don't think I did very well. Math always was a struggle so I had to go to learning assistance. Math and Spelling. I knew the teachers were trying to help me, but so many things just weren't working for me. I pretty much believed that I couldn't learn.

Hannah's description of her primary years is vague. The 'fog' she talked about permeates her perceptions of that time. The truth that Hannah took away from these years is that learning is a struggle. The red X's on her work were a signal that her work was wrong and that she had learning troubles. I infer that the more tests she wrote, the more this message was confirmed. As she indicated, she came to believe that she was incapable of learning.

Similarly, Shawn's memories of primary school are not especially informative. What stand out are his feelings – feelings of isolation and feelings of being out of control.

Shawn: I don't belong

When I was little I had to go through all these tests. I did so many tests when I was younger that it just kind of got to me where I felt like an isolated caged animal. There's so much about elementary school that I don't remember. I blocked a lot of it out with weed and alcohol later, but here are a few things I remember. I remember feeling like I didn't belong anywhere. First of all I didn't belong in my family. I was the only coloured kid in a white family. Then I didn't belong in my school. I was the only coloured kid in the school too, with all these white kids. No one would eat their lunch with me. There were so many times when I was right out of control – like I couldn't control what I was doing any more than other people could. I would do stuff like jumping over desks to fight kids. The teachers in that school didn't care. All they did was field trips and whatnot they never really sat down and actually learned about when I was little.

The truths that Shawn took away from these memories were that he didn't belong anywhere and that teachers didn't care. The tests he went through left him feeling like an isolated caged animal. They were a signal to him that there was something wrong with him.

Amber invested a great deal of thought and energy into recalling and reflecting upon her primary school experiences. Her narrative offers a great deal of insight into what it was like to be a student who was challenged by the structures and expectations of her Grade 1 classroom. The messages she received about herself were unmistakably negative.

Amber: Beak Lady

Kindergarten went really well for me. My brother used to walk me there and it felt safe to have him around – I always had a sense that he was nearby, even after the bell had gone. I changed schools for Grade 1 and although my brother still walked me, he seemed very far away. I really don't believe I should have been put in school as early as I did. I don't think I was ready for it.

So there I was in Grade 1, alone. To begin with I was really shy. I never spoke. I couldn't see the board until I got these big ugly boy glasses. Even then, most of the time they were shoved to the back of my desk. I needed tubes in my ears too, but I could hear my teacher yell fine. Mom called me the sensitive one – I could always pick up on when someone was annoyed with me - and Mrs. H. spent most of her time annoyed with me. She hated me. She had this great big hawk-like beak, a helmet of dark curly hair and, I swear, pointed ears. She'd stand over you and, "Bleaaahhhh!"

If I try to picture myself in that Grade 1 desk, this is what I see – a gawky little girl doing her best to escape the attention of the teacher. As she talked all I heard was, "Yap, yap, yap," so after a while I gave up on listening. Instead, I would fiddle in my desk. There were lots of things to do in there...picking at the skin around my fingernails, carving my initials into the soft wood, dumping glue inside or painting it onto the back of my hand. I would let it dry, and then slowly peel it away, staring at the webbed pattern of my skin that came away on the filmy sheet. The,

“Yap, yap, yapping,” would continue until she handed out our worksheets or asked us to get out our books. All the other kids would get busily down to work, their heads bent over the paper, pencils working away at forming letters and filling in blanks, mouthing words as they read. I would watch them zipping along while I stared blankly at the work in front of me. “How do they know what to do?” I wondered, “Why can’t I be like that?” No matter how hard I tried, nothing I did seemed to be right.

Sometimes I would ask for the answers from the kids sitting next to me, and usually they’d give it to me, but getting the answers didn’t help, and I sure didn’t want to ask Beak Lady. Why didn’t she help me? The only kind of help I remember getting was shrieking, like, “Get your head down and get back to work! Apply yourself! Get focused! Stop fiddling! Where are your glasses? Speak up! Stop wasting your time! You stay at your desk and keep working while the other kids come to carpet for Story. You can’t go out for recess until you have that finished! What is wrong with you?”

I would be thinking, “What did I do wrong? What did I do to make you upset with me? Get focused on what? Do what? How? Why aren’t you helping me? Why are you picking on me? Why do you hate me? What is wrong with me?”

There is one time that really stands out in my memories of that year. My mom tells me that I had a bladder infection around that time, so I was probably asking to go to the bathroom a lot, which was hard for me because I was so afraid to say anything at all. One day I kept putting up my hand to ask to go and Mrs. H. kept saying no. Finally I begged and she snapped at me, “Fine! Go! And don’t come back!”

I left the classroom and stumbled down the hall toward the bathroom. My head was in a whirl, my sight blurred by tears. “Don’t come back? Where do I go? What do I do?” I was

shuffling along, head down, when I spotted a sparkling bead on the floor, then another, and another. There was a pretty secretary there, holding a necklace that had broken. I began to help her pick up the beads. She noticed that I was crying and asked me what was wrong. I told her, and she kindly said, "Well you can stay here with me for a while." Eventually the teacher came looking for me and said, "Why are you taking so long? Why didn't you come back to class?"

"B-b-but you told me not to come back!" I sputtered.

She got a funny look on her face and said, "I didn't say that! You come back to class now!" I remember looking back at the pretty secretary, a desperate look in my eye, as if to say, "Please help me!" as Beak Lady dragged me away.

Kindergarten is fun. School starts to get not fun as soon as you have your first bad teacher. It really screws you up and I had that right away in Grade 1. If I had a good teacher it might have been totally different for me. When they broke the news to me that I'd be repeating Grade 1, I thought, "Here I am failing and I'm coming back next year and there are all these desks and there is not going to be a desk for me." Well, there was a desk for me, and a new teacher. I can't remember who she was – she wasn't too bad, but they never put themselves out for somebody to help or anything like that. It was more like, 'Everybody does it this way. Everybody follows along with the group'. What I never figured out was, how?

I was struck by the bewilderment and helplessness that Amber expressed in her story. She was aware that she was 'not getting it', yet the only direction provided by the teacher was to 'apply yourself' and 'stop fiddling'. She began to see herself as set apart from the other students, who all seemed to know what to do while she looked on.

Her teacher, the Beak Lady, swooped and hovered, screeched and squawked like a malevolent crow in that prereflective landscape. The landscape of the classroom was a dangerous

one for Amber. The miniature landscape of the interior of her desk offered respite and escape through the entertainments it contained, but the escape was always temporary. She was repeatedly pulled back to her present reality by admonishments to ‘get focused!’ and ‘pay attention!’ The pretty secretary emerged as a benevolent being who offered a glimmer of kindness but was powerless to change the situation.

Amber came to understand many truths through these experiences. She learned that school was not a safe place; school was a lonely place. Teachers were not to be trusted. What she came to understand about herself was that she was hateful and annoying. She learned that ‘learning’ is a thing that involves focusing and applying yourself, and that these were skills she did not have. There was something wrong with her. She was different from everybody else; they were fast and she was slow; they could read and she could not; they knew what to do and she did not; they deserved to listen to stories and play at recess but she did not.

This section of narratives took us back to our ‘original landscapes’ of school experience and revealed some powerful origins of our situated identities and sense of ourselves. Our perceptions and our presence in those spaces played a part in determining the truths we lived by as we moved through our school years toward our present realities. This process informs us, Greene (1995) tells us, because “despite the distancing and symbolizing that come later, the narratives we shape out of the materials of our lived lives must somehow take account of our original landscapes if we are to be truly present to ourselves” (p. 75). When we make the effort to reflect upon them “we become far more present to our enmeshed and open-ended selves” (Greene, p. 73). This consideration of our enmeshed and open-ended selves leads us to a consideration of the stories that we live by in the present.

The truth about stories: Our open-ended selves

The stories that were planted in us, and that we planted in ourselves when we were younger continue to emerge in the narratives of self that we are living in the present.

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (King, 2003)

This section presents narratives of the present day. Their placement here, after all of the previous narratives, indicates a ‘drawing together’ of the threads of the earlier narratives. After peeling away each outer layer until we arrived at what I consider to be the center of our school experiences – our earliest school years – we loop back to present. These narratives lead us toward constructing an understanding of aspects of the original question that guided this inquiry: *How do narratives shared by Adult Basic Education students help us to understand the complex nature of the relationship between evaluative assessment experiences and identity/subjectivity formation?* This drawing together of the narratives toward the present allows me to consider each of the participant’s narratives across the contexts of self as student in the past and self as student in the present as well as, where possible, their assertions about who they are when they are not students. As a result, I am able to seek alignments and conflicts between the expressions of identity that emerge through the language in narratives of experiences across time and context. These alignments and conflicts begin to shed light on the role of Discourses in perpetuating social practices and entrenched situated identities in these particular narratives and enable us to theorize the ways in which these effects reverberate beyond the experiences of these students to the experiences of others. I represent my

conceptualization of the notion of situated identities by constructing my interpretation of the ‘stories that were planted’ in each of us ‘along the way’ and that we are living in the present. This metaphor for situated identities comes from the writing of Ben Okri which I shared in the Introduction. I discovered his words within King’s (2000) *The Truth About Stories*:

The Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri says that, “In a fractured age, when cynicism is God, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly- in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (in King, 2003, p. 152).

These narratives offer us some insights into the long-term impact of our early experiences in school. When we consider the evolving self as “an ongoing narrative project” (Goodson, 1998, p. 4), it is possible to seek the traces of earlier narratives in the story of the self that we are living now. The metaphor of the ‘stories we planted’ brings into focus the complexities of self construction, situated identity and our classroom experiences. Stories are planted in us, knowingly or unknowingly, and we plant stories in ourselves, knowingly or unknowingly, and we live those stories in various ways as we move through the chapters of our lives.

The stories that were planted in us throughout our school years hold on with a fierce tenacity. Their echoes resonate throughout our subsequent years through to the present and colour our perceptions of the messages we receive throughout our lives. Stories are planted in us when we see ourselves reflected back by those around us through their actions and reactions to us. In addition, Sumara and Davis (1998) assert, this coming to know about ourselves “occurs

amid our relationships with others and among the artefacts that are deposited about us in the form of a cultural world” (p. 79). In this way, the messages and the artefacts that surround us convey the Discourses that represent the values of the institution while helping to create the story of the self that grows within us.

Paige: I have to get it right. Please approve of me.

My ‘not student’ self

I am in a long-term relationship, having been married for over 20 years, and I have many close friends. I also have three well-adjusted children who are confident, capable young adults. I own a home and have a well-paid full-time job. I’m a Graduate student. I’ve succeeded in all of my courses, earned a Master’s degree, become a PhD candidate and presented my work at various local, national and international conferences. I have evolved from innovative classroom teacher to teacher educator and confident academic. These are the things I know about myself. Each of these facts defines me as what most would consider a ‘successful’ adult. It’s been a long time since Grade 2, and I am aware of all of the ways I’ve moved past the self who panicked at the prospect of getting one word wrong on a spelling test. I think.

Student now: Another Apple Story

I submitted a paper for presentation and discussion at a national academic conference recently. The segment of the conference that I chose to submit my proposal to is designed for graduate students. It is meant to be a safe supportive venue for emerging academics to discuss their ‘work in progress’ and receive feedback from a discussant. I’ve been working on this research for five years, I’m passionate about it and I feel confident that I am developing new

insights in my field. When I receive notice about who my discussant is to be, I take some time to look up the name and find out some more about his background. I am somewhat dismayed to discover that this experienced 'mentor' appears to represent a very traditional branch of the assessment community and I begin to worry about how my work will be received. I prepare myself with a lot of self-talk about the supportive design of the session and reassurances that anyone who would choose to enter this venue as a discussant would do so with the best of intentions.

On the morning of the roundtable session, I try to keep myself calm as I leave my residence room and walk across campus. I enter a large room that is set up with at least 20 tables with 6 chairs at each. People are beginning to file in and circulate through the tables peering at the number cards that indicate the seating arrangements. I follow suit, and eventually find my spot and sit down. I am the first at the table, and am soon joined by another graduate student and four academics from various universities. As our table fills up, the rest of the room is also filling with people and the noise level is gradually increasing from a hum to a buzz. Over the buzz, we lean towards each other and sort out who is who. My discussant is there, an older gentleman who introduces himself in a rather formal way. He shakes my hand and says hello. I smile bravely while returning his handshake and say, "I am very interested in meeting you. It appears that we come from very different branches of the assessment field." He offers me a slightly puzzled look and nothing more. This does nothing to reduce the mad pounding of my heart. We work out that another of the group is the discussant for the other graduate student and the other two are along as interested observers.

The other graduate student hands a copy of her paper to each person at the table and I realize with horror that I have misunderstood the instructions for participation in the session – I

have nothing to give the other participants. Somehow it is decided that we will discuss my paper first. I dive in and start talking about my 'work in progress' while consciously attempting to calm the quaver in my voice.

I have submitted my early musings on the analysis processes I am learning to use, and qualified my attempts with the assertion that the work is at a very early stage. My intention was to get some feedback on the process. I begin to describe the paper that I've submitted and the analysis that I am working through, all the while realizing that what I am saying makes little sense to the people who don't have a copy of my paper. The noise in the room is getting louder and louder. I strain to make myself heard and to make my ideas understood.

*As my discussant launches into his response, I listen with growing apprehension and horror as he adopts a very challenging tone, firing question after question at me about the validity in my data collection methods, the inadequacies of claims I make in my paper, the fact that I didn't follow the right instructions – at the climax of his tirade, he says to me, "I read your 'story' about writing report cards just as I was submitting marks for my graduate course in statistics and you know what? I didn't **feel** guilty!" I feel his words hit me like stones. Part of me is angry – he obviously has no idea what I'm talking about – he doesn't understand what I'm trying to do. Part of me is mortified. He represents the 'establishment' of the research community. His name is on publications all over the place. He represents 'belonging' at this academic gathering.*

I am vaguely aware of the other faculty across the table who are voicing their objections to his comments and his tone. I start out attempting to explain myself – my voice and my arguments get weaker and weaker until, eventually, I stop speaking all together and I sit with tears quietly rolling down my cheeks.

I am mortified. This is not the place or the time for tears!

The discussion moves on to the second paper and I try my best to sit back and lose myself in following the conversation, but I can't stop the flow of tears. I am painfully aware that I am sitting in a room full of strangers – tables of six all around me – I have no idea if people at the other tables notice what's happening with me, but I can't bring myself to get up and walk out – past them all – and I can NOT get my tears to stop. I know my eyes are red, my face is blotchy, and if anyone is to look at me it will be really obvious that something is going on. I'm trapped.

My discussant makes the first move to end my embarrassment. He gets up and walks away. I wait for the session to be over and try to choose a route out of the room that will take me past the fewest number of people possible. As I am making my escape, I run into one of my mentors. He immediately asks me what is wrong and I explain, as briefly as possible, while trying to hide my face from his inquiring gaze. He looks at me, kindly, and says, "Is this another Apple story?" I sense the truth in his remark immediately. I thought I was so far past all that....am I still so dependent on the approval of others? Have I not grown at all since Grade 2? Reeling, I get myself outside. It takes me hours to get my emotions back in check.

It is humiliating, all these months later, to acknowledge what happened that day. I am ashamed at my weakness and embarrassed by my response to a challenging situation. As the call for proposals for the next conference comes up, I find myself questioning whether or not I will take the risk of presenting my work again.

At the same time, as a researcher I'm fascinated by the traces of the Apple story that became evident through this narrative. The growing sense that I was not going to succeed was accompanied by the same feelings of panic I experienced when I forgot how to spell apple. The tears that came, my inability to control them, and the embarrassment I felt at my weakness were

familiar to me as well. Another feeling that was familiar was the fear. I was afraid of losing the approval of the academic community and believed that this person had the right to point out to me that I didn't belong at the conference. How is it that we are open-ended selves, always becoming, yet we remain who we were? When I review all of the narratives of my self, the autoethnographies that I have included in this dissertation, I am now more critically aware of the stories that were planted in me, the stories I planted in myself, and the stories I live by in the present.

The story that was planted in me; the story that I planted in myself

The story that was planted in me is the story of a little girl who is loved and accepted in school. I am smart and clever and lovable. The teacher likes me. She shows me this by the way she smiles when I eagerly answer questions. She calls on me when I put up my hand and tells me that my answers are good. I am reliable. She shows me this when she lets me clean the chalkboards. I am special. She shows me this when she invites me to stay after school to read with her. I am capable and successful. The stickers and check marks and 'Good!' on my schoolwork and the grades on my report card show me that. When my spelling test gets posted on the bulletin board, it reinforces how special I am. Not everyone gets their tests put there, only the Stellar Spellers. Tests are good. Each test is a way for me to prove my capabilities and reinforce my status as a successful student. Successful students deserve special privileges.

I planted in myself some additional messages. My ability to learn is a magical thing that feels good. Love and acceptance in school are dependent on perfect scores. I belong, but only as long as I succeed.

The story that I live by is a story of succeeding, but the rewards that accompany success are dependent upon my ability to perform in successful ways. It is as though I still believe that my abilities are tenuous, easily lost. It is as though I still believe that ability is a gift that can be taken away and I have to continually prove that I deserve the success that I've earned.

Hannah: I can learn!

Hannah's not-student self

I am good at computers. I enjoy being in contact with friends and family. I enjoy working out. I work out 3 times a week. And when I can, I enjoy working with a trainer and learning new things. I am good at looking after my animals and spending time with them. I also enjoy scrapbooking and reading books when I am not too busy.

I haven't had many paying jobs but I have babysat and now this one working in a health food store. But before that I volunteered at a pony farm and I enjoyed that. I always liked animals but I didn't want to get into that for a career. My last volunteer job was working in a massage therapist. I thought that was what I was going to do until recently.

The people I work with are almost like family they are so good to me. I started organizing the shelves to make it look nice and make sure the English side was just showing. Then I was moved to unloading grocery orders when they came in. Now I wash, cut and wrap vegetables, receive orders and put the produce out. It feels good to know how far I have come. It feels good when a customer asks what is there for gluten free products. I can tell them what I have tried, which is good, which isn't, so it makes me feel good that I can help people out. At work they say that I'm always happy, and I always work hard.

Hannah shared another story from her adulthood that helps to shed light on who she is as a student now.

A Doctor's Opinion: I Can't Learn?

After I was out of high school a few years and working, I was getting some help from a vocational counsellor. I wanted to go back to school and I was trying to decide what would be the best program. She set me up to have some tests to help me figure out what would be best for my future. When I met the Doctor giving me the tests, I almost laughed out loud! He was like a comic book character – tall, skinny, funny small goatee. I went through a long day of testing and he asked me a lot of questions, like what kind of things do I want to do in my life. I went back the next week for the results. I didn't really know what to expect – I was mostly curious. I took my Mom and the vocational counsellor along for support.

We sat in there in his office, across a big desk from that funny-looking man. He opened his folder and started through a bunch of fancy technical names about this test and that score. I have to admit I kind of drifted away mentally as he went on and on, then I was brought back to the room with a jerk when I heard him say, "Well, based on all of this my opinion is that there is really no point in you going back to school because you can't learn anyways. You might as well just stay with retail."

At first I was stunned....I can't learn? I can't LEARN???? How can someone say something like that! Aren't they supposed to be there to help you? I was so mad – I don't remember ever being more mad! My whole body was tense. I was gripping the arms of the chair. I seriously felt like I was going to blow up. I was like a bomb. I said, "No way. You're not making me do that! I don't care; I'm going to school anyways!"

You should have seen the look on his face. He was like, “Oh dear, I’ve never met anyone like this before!” He was shuffling his papers all around, glancing around the room, till he suddenly said to my vocational coach, “I need to talk to you!” The two of them left the room and man did I wish to be a bug on that wall.

In a way it did me good, because that day I made up my mind that I was going to school no matter what. I was determined to prove him wrong, and I still am. When I get my diploma, I’m tempted to take it right to him! I heard later that he says he is someone who really enjoys helping people. I thought, “Oh really? That’s very interesting. That’s not what I would say!”

Student now: I have a dream

I’m such a different person as a student now. I’m hard-working and motivated. I was really nervous at first. Even though my head told me so strongly not to believe that doctor, the things he said sat in my mind and made me wonder about myself sometimes. Now I find it amazing that I can actually do some things that the teachers never thought I could do. I went to the Bridging program which really helped me to get used to the idea of school again and what to do, then I took some English courses. It was way different than I expected. I’m with adults who want to learn, not kids just goofing off in class. Well, once in a while there are these young girls and they’ll be like, “Where’s all the hot guys?” and I’ll think, “I’m not here to look at hot guys, I’m here to learn, so shut up!” I’d never say it out loud though.

In elementary and high school I did not understand English at all, actually the literature. I thought it was going to be a lot harder. I’m even doing Fractions now, and understanding the process. I get lost sometimes, but then I ask for help and I get it. I am more determined than I ever was and I have a goal now, to be a Personal Trainer, so I really want to achieve that goal.

Hannah's determination underscores everything. She is experiencing success, and is slightly surprised by it. She seems to sense that her determination, hard work and motivation are responsible for making learning more possible for her now.

The story that was planted in Hannah: The story she planted in herself

I am a girl with learning troubles. The X's on my work and the Modified grades on my report cards show me that. I am someone who needs a lot of help in school, but there isn't any help that really makes a difference. I think Learning Assistance is a place where they're supposed to figure that out, but they can't give me whatever it is I need. I have to work harder than everyone else and I don't get to do special activities because of my learning troubles. I don't belong in the same category with the 'regular kids'. I know that because I'm in the Life Skills program and even when I go to regular classes I have to have helpers with me. I'm pretty much incapable of learning.

This is the story that Hannah's narratives of her school years reveal, but somehow Hannah also planted in herself an idea that she could change the story she lived by and is in the process of changing her life. She had her 'learning troubles' when she was younger and no real sense of what to do about them, other than wishing for things to be different. Somehow things are different now that she is older. When I think about the rage she felt as she listened to the doctor telling her that she couldn't learn, I am reminded of the Hannah who sat in the Life Skills room and read a Biology text book that she had bought for herself in spite of the fact that her teachers and teacher's aides expected much less from her. Hannah retells her Doctor story often. With a smile she restates her determination to prove that doctor wrong, which is what she is seeking to do every day that she is at school. The Hannah that had to work harder than everyone

else is still in evidence as well. She is known as a hard worker at her job, and her comments about her ‘boy crazy’ classmates reveal that she is a hard worker at school as well. Somewhere along the way Hannah changed her story and started to believe that she could learn.

Amber: Oh my God, I can actually do it!

My ‘not student’ self

I passed hairdressing school and started cutting hair when I was still quite young. I wasn't bad looking in high school but I was so shy that nobody really paid much attention to me. When I got into hairdressing at 18 I just blossomed. I had a nice looking body all that kind of stuff not that I was fat or anything before, I was just really insecure. These guys came into the salon one day - one of them was sort of an old boyfriend from way back in Grade 8. It felt so good to have them walk in and look at me, all surprised. I remember thinking, "Sure! I'll cut your hair! Say anything mean and you'll lose your hair!" There was a feeling of power as well, you know?

Since then, I've had a variety of jobs, and have gradually learned over the years to look for jobs that are going to fit my skillset. I'm a hard worker. I've worked as a baker, in warehouses, in retail and in cleaning. Not everybody's approach works for me. I think the work situations that work best for me are when you can be flexible about how you do things, so jobs like cleaning are good because I can do it my own way. Sometimes I'll look at a job posting and think to myself, "I know that's not my strong point and I know I'll have problems with that," but everybody says to apply anyways. The thing is, you know what you can do and you know what you can't do. When it comes to keeping notes or anything like that I'm fairly good at it and I like

hard physical work like gardening. I move fast and I work fast. I get the abstract. I'm able to think out a situation in many different ways. Like cooking – I can take a recipe, try it once and change the recipe, and it works. I can teach other people how to do things. When I teach somebody they're like, "Wow, you're so patient."

I'm not good at till. Not any till work because I get to the till and at first I can do it, but if customers are impatient I'm all fumble fingers and I just can't do it. If I've got too much input coming in it scatters for me. Memorizing is not my strong point and I know that, so I avoid jobs that will involve a lot of memorization. The main thing that really bothers me, when it really really matters to me is when there's a judgment on my smarts. That bothers me.

My defiant streak still comes out in any job. I don't like being told what to do. This goes way back to my early hairdressing days. I remember that we had a rule that on Fridays you had to wear a skirt to work. So I went and got the shortest skirt I could. I'd be thinking, "There you go! I'm wearing a skirt! You may not like it but I'm wearing it!"

In other situations, like regular life outside of work, my daughter helps me sometimes where I don't have clarity; where I find I'm losing grasp of things just because of the disability because that is always there. It's a feeling like I can and cannot do it kind of thing. I never know if I can. I kind of get confused sometimes and she gives me clarity. I can take it from her without feeling judged.

Oh my God, I can actually do it!

When I decided to come back to school, I didn't tell my Mom I was doing it. I just did it on my own. One of the biggest fears I had was the fact that I had to write an essay. The thought terrified me, but coming back to school now, all these years later, has been great. Everybody's

so kind and it was such a relief. The biggest difference I've noticed is that the teachers here seem happy. It's so enlightening. Ingrid is such an awesome teacher you get the feeling that no matter what you do she's not going to be upset with you. Coming back and doing math with her has been the most awesome experience.

I really truly don't care about the marks, but I still have fears about being judged. I had all these papers for my dyslexia from disability services and I gave them to my math teacher, but I didn't share them with any other teachers. I didn't want to be judged by them.

Here's a situation where I really felt judged; early on, there was this paper we had to write about the perfect gift. I started to write about my dream of having my own house and yard someday. When I showed it to my English teacher, he said to me, "You sound just like my ex-wife." This got me really upset – he's made so many negative comments about his ex-wife – so right away I thought, "Forget it." I decided to write something completely different. As soon as I'm judged it really bothers me. Like in Math the other day, someone suggested that we play Crib. I started getting flustered about not knowing how to do the counting and I could tell my classmate Jim was getting annoyed. He said to me, "Are you counting on your fingers?"

"Shut up!" I snapped at him, and then I just backed out of the game.

Even now, if I'm sitting in Math lots of times I'm listening to people but I'm still not completely understanding and if I don't get something, I find myself fiddling until the teacher gets there. I need to have a lot of practice with new concepts. When they give one example I need a lot more of them. Usually the next question is something totally different and you're thinking, "Okay that looks nothing like the example. I need way more practice." I ask Ingrid to actually give me other work and walk me through each step because if I miss a step I get confused. I need step by step by step and I need to know why it gets to that step.

Dealing with grades is a constant struggle. Even now I go away once I get an assignment and wonder if I can do it. I mean I've been lucky. In Math I've been able to go at my own pace but in English I'm thinking, "Can I actually do it?" And you're nervous all the time until you see that grade. Every time in Math when I did a test and I thought I did good, I totally bombed it, so your sense of perception on whether or not you can do it or whether or not you can get it is just not there because like I say, if I think I did good I usually did a really lousy job. I never know how I'm going to do on a paper until the teacher marks it and gives it back.

It's almost like you're trying to grab something hot and you reach for it and you just... you're not sure if you have the guts to actually grab it or whatever. It's a kind of feeling where you kind of have the guts to do it but you're so unsure that you don't know if you're going to make it. As much as I don't care it's a worry fear way back.

I'm getting straight A's in English. When I got my first paper back it just blew me away – I got 9/10 – and I thought, "Did they mark it right? Am I in the right class?" It's not like I really cared about the mark – I was thinking whatever I get I get, but to find out that I got an A? Last week in English the teacher stood up in front of the class and named me the top student and I sat there thinking, "What do you know? Wow, ok, a little shocking!"

You know how there is always a student in class and they come in, they sit there and they don't even look like they're really doing anything and they get straight A's? That's the feeling I've got in English right now. I know I'm doing a lot but it doesn't feel like I'm doing anything. It feels like I'm really good at it and I don't know why.

I took my report card home to my daughter the other day. It was a real thrill to actually take it home and get A's in everything, and it shows that I stayed after because I had 6/6 on this and 6/6 on that. My daughter said, "Oh, that's good!"

I even phoned my Mom and said, “See listen to this!”

She said, “Good for you! You finally got your head out of your butt!”

“Thank you very much Mom,” I said, “It’s not like it was there in the first place!”

I’m coming back next semester and I’ve registered to have both my classes with the same teachers again. I just don’t want to take the risk of trying to get to know other teachers yet.

It’s like a breath of fresh air.

Oh my God I can actually do it!

Amber has learned to manipulate her work environments so that her challenges with learning are not evident. She has found confidence in her strengths, and has developed strategies to avoid situations that push her into areas where she feels powerless. Echoes of Amber’s stories of school experience appear in her ‘not student’ narrative. She is particularly sensitive to situations where she feels her ‘smarts’ are being judged, and she gets flustered when she thinks that customers are getting impatient with her. This resonates back to moments when her teachers got impatient with her slowness and when her father got impatient with her while ‘helping’ with her homework. When she talks about her defiant streak, and the short skirts she wore to work because it was ‘skirt day’, an image of Amber in her Grade 5 classroom springs to mind – especially the day that she refused to take her coat off for her teacher.

Amber’s narrative of being a student now is particularly revealing when considered alongside her early school experiences. Sensitivity to being judged is always present, such as during the Crib game with Jim or when her English teacher made a negative comment about her essay topic. Situations such as these cause her to lash out or to withdraw for fear of being found lacking. A key feature that stands out is the safety that Amber now feels in school. Overriding all of the success and accomplishments she is experiencing as a student now is an expression of

relief at the kindness of the teachers. When she is ‘stuck’ in Math, for example, she still finds herself fiddling at her desk until the teacher comes along. Thankfully, what happens next is not a tirade. Instead, she says, “You get the feeling that no matter what you do she’s not going to be upset with you.” A need for approval from the teacher is still achingly present and alludes to the regret she felt at not being able to attain it as a child.

She is finally getting some approval for her report cards when she takes them home – from her daughter. She’s discovering herself to be a successful student who is held up as an example to others. Although she describes the ways she is taking control of her own learning by seeking help, by requesting extra practice materials and spending extra time after class, she still sees ability as a magical thing. This is evident when she talks about her perceptions of the ‘Straight A’ students:

You know how there is always a student in class and they come in, they sit there, they don’t even look like they’re really doing anything and they get straight A’s? That’s the feeling I’ve got in English right now. I know I’m doing a lot but it doesn’t feel like I’m doing anything. It feels like I’m really good at it and I don’t know why.

When she says this, it is reminiscent of the little girl who sat watching the others zipping ahead in her primary classrooms – those others with a seemingly magical ability to know what to do while she didn’t. Her notion of the successful student seems to be of someone who looks and feels like they’re not really doing anything, but they’re ‘getting it right’. The messages she received in school were that ‘applying yourself’ and ‘getting focused’ were the way to improve her grades yet this is not what she focuses on when she talks about her current feelings of success. What she focuses on is the appearance of effortless learning as a marker of school success, and she’s somehow achieved it.

Control over her achievement still appears to rest in the hands of her teachers. She is still nervous until she sees the grade on an assignment and doesn't know how well she's done until she receives her evaluation, especially in Math. As much as she is learning that she has capabilities that were previously out of her grasp, the 'worry fear' that sits way back is ever present, as is the contradictory assertion that she doesn't care about the evaluation.

It's almost like you're trying to grab something hot and you reach for it and you just... you're not sure if you have the guts to actually grab it or whatever. It's a kind of feeling where you kind of have the guts to do it but you're so unsure that you don't know if you're going to make it. As much as I don't care it's a worry fear way back.

The story that was planted in Amber: The story she planted in herself

I am someone who doesn't know how to learn properly. I am not smart. I know this because learning properly means focusing and applying yourself and I fiddle too much for that. I know this because of what my teachers always say to me. My report cards say it too. The E's and F's in my report cards also tell me that I am a failure. When I had to do Grade 1 over again it was because I failed. I failed Grade 4 too. I am irritating and annoying to others when I can't do things. I know this because of the way they react to me when I don't get it. Teachers don't like me. There is something wrong with me, like a piece that's missing. I am slower than everybody else. I know this because I'm still working on my worksheets when everyone else gets to go to the carpet for Story or out for recess or home after school. Everybody else knows how to follow along with the group and I don't. I know this because I sit and watch them and everyone knows what to do but me.

The story Amber planted in herself adds these elements: *There are some things I can do. I can make the other kids afraid of me and it gives me power. If I look and act powerful on the outside, people don't know that there is something missing on the inside.*

These are the messages that Amber's early school experience reveal. They reverberate throughout her present even though she is finally achieving success in school. She may no longer see herself as a failure, but school is not yet a safe place. She still has to be on the alert and protect herself from revealing the parts that are missing.

Andrew: I'm only in it for myself

Student now: It's not an escape from anything

When I think about myself as a student now, I realize the biggest difference between then and now is how I'm doing socially. Academically, I'm still about the same. I still struggle with Math; I struggle with Language Arts and do well with Computers. In English I'm average grade-wise I'm about the same maybe a little bit better if I want to feel good about myself, but socially I'm completely better off.

Another big difference is how I am in the classroom. I used to be terrified about speaking in public. I used to put a lot of energy into avoiding attention, but now I can be the center of attention with around 30 people in the classroom and I don't care. I'm learning to understand that it's only my own opinion of myself that matters. I'm much more outspoken, more lively, more friendly and that's made the experience much more enjoyable. Here, when I come here I just come here just because it's fun - it's not an escape from anything.

My dad asks me how I'm doing at school now, and I say, "I'm doing great." That's all he gets. It's not for him anymore. I don't need his approval, I don't need his support, and I don't need him to say great job or bad job, or be great or bad or sad it doesn't matter. I am here for me not him. I'm only in it for myself now.

The traces of Andrew's earlier stories are most evident in relation to his social standing in the classroom and the freedom from his father's expectations that he feels he's obtained. When he was younger, Andrew's vision of the 'successful student' was connected to the idea of social success. He sees himself as successful now, but not because his grades are any better, but because he is liked.

The story that was planted in Andrew: The story he planted in himself

I'm not a likable person. The teachers don't like me and neither do the other kids. Teachers decide the grades for the kids. The kids they like get decent grades and the kids they don't like get bad grades. I know this because I don't get good grades no matter how hard I try and teachers don't like me. Good grades are a way to get approval from your father and as much as I want my Dad's approval, I can't control my grades. No matter how hard I work, I suck. School is a jail and I'm a prisoner there.

Andrew hasn't gained any more control over his ability to achieve and doesn't appear to have modified his sense of himself as a learner, but if this is the story that Andrew planted in himself, in some ways he has changed the story he lives by. As he says, "I'm learning to understand that it's only my own opinion of myself that matters." He no longer sees school as a place to escape from or escape to.

Shawn: The New Me*Shawn's 'Not Student' self*

It is difficult to get a sense of who Shawn is when he is not a student. He offered some glimpses into his 'not student' life when he talked about what he loves to do when he is out of school.

When I'm skateboarding, that's my main exit from life. Skate boarding's it. Even as a kid, after school was done and I got my board I was totally free. That's when I felt good about myself. When I was skateboarding with my friends.

He talks about his love of clothing and fashion as well:

You know how some girls will never go out without makeup or doing their hair? That's like clothes for me. Like you know how some people get ready for going out by just throwing jogging pants on? For me I just can't do it. I've always just been like that. I'm like a girl with my clothes. I have to check the mirror like three times before I leave in the morning. If something's not right I have to switch it. Shoes too, I have to go home and clean my shoes every day. That's my passion.

He described the series of events that helped him to decide to go back to school:

Things got really bad for me for a long time after high school, until I guess I got to the lowest point. I had a couple of my friends pass away, one got stabbed on my birthday and I saw a little kid die. I was going down the gutter. I was selling drugs, doing mad weed, drinking every night and the cops wanted me bad, so I kind of made a deal with myself. I said to myself, "This is the past. It's time to move on to something bigger. I've already done all this, and experienced

death. I've seen my friends go. I've been down that road now it's time for me to flip that and better myself."

'Flipping that' and 'bettering himself' meant going back to school. When I asked him to describe his 'not student' self as opposed to his 'student' self, he had this to say,

If you ask me who I am when I'm not a student, I'll tell you that I'm the same person as I am every day. I'm the same on the streets as I am in school. I'm the same person. I don't come with a different attitude or anything. I come with me.

I'm left to surmise the differences or similarities between Shawn's 'student' and 'not student' self. I read between the lines and see someone who is committed to his relationships with friends and to creating a 'self' that is authentic and integrated. When I consider his statements in relation to the narratives he shares about his 'student now' self, there is very much a sense of 'becoming' and 'designing' a self that is emerging – a new self.

Student now: I am my own strength

When I decided to come back to school, I was at the point where there was no hope but then I just looked at it and thought, "I'm on my own so now there's no hope in it but to better myself. I'll make the teachers eat those words that they said to me back in the day. I want to show them that I'm not a statistic or a bump; I am a person with a voice and a brain that wants to learn and I'll be damned if they try to hold me back. I'm going to go with as much as I can and learn as much as I can while I'm in this.

I'm a headstrong student that wants to learn as much as I can. Now I want to learn; I'm older now, wiser now, smarter now. I've learned a lot on my own and now I'm more challenging. I challenge the teacher and I challenge myself. As much information as I can collect in my head

I will. I want to learn about so many different things not just one thing. I want to learn everything. I want to learn worldly things like the rights of people who have spoken out. I want to hear the words about standing up and saying, "This is wrong and this is how you do it."

I want to be a student that's more concentrated. I want to do it; be a hard on my own student rather than a free like not caring anymore student. That didn't work out too well. My main strength now is that I want to do it now and now my brain clicked and said I want to do it so I want to learn as much as I can. My main strength is me. I am my own strength.

Unfortunately I'm learning that things I thought I knew I clearly didn't. I just got a paper back for English and the teacher just picked it apart. I still got a problem with teachers picking apart my stuff, and no matter how hard I try it's not good enough. If I was in high school I would have just chucked it out, but since I'm in school now, I say to myself, "You gotta go do it now, you can't just ditch it and say you're done with it because that's the old you coming back up – you gotta try to work on the new you." I'll keep doing it again, even though I hate it. That's the only way you're going to learn though. I gotta learn how to take criticism. It sucks but I gotta do it...otherwise I'll be stuck at square one.

I just got a test back in computers and I just figured out that I have to do computers all over again. I was all bummed out and I was like, "Okay I'm not even coming back next semester." But then I was just like, "If I take a course again I'm going to be smartest one in that course so I might as well. It will help me learn better." I'm happy that I'm learning and I'm definitely happy that I'm here even though I thought I knew everything. I fully did. One of the big differences is that now they're like, "You're not learning, okay, let's teach you, let's sit down."

I'm creating my own reality. I'm going to better myself and make myself a better person and I'm gonna take as much knowledge as I can and that's what I'm doing. I find myself even

staying after class and studying. I've always been into history. Even when I was younger I studied a lot about Martin Luther and Malcolm X, so that also put a lot of power in my head about freedom and standing up for my rights. Now that I'm older I understand what Martin Luther was saying and Malcolm X was saying and what they mean.

You know where I'm going with this schooling? I'm going all the way. I want to take business afterwards. I want to open up my own business company with shoes, clothing, it's pretty much what I want to do. I feel like I'm successful right now. Do you want to know how I define success? I wake up every morning breathing, the sun shining, and a shit-eating grin on my face.

In Shawn's narrative, the 'old' Shawn and the 'new' Shawn rub up against each other. I see definite echoes of the past in the lingering desire for revenge that is expressed when talks about making his old teachers 'eat their words'. He describes his first response to teacher evaluations as consistently defensive and his continued sense that his trying is still not good enough when he says, "*I still got a problem with teachers picking apart my stuff, and no matter how hard I try it's not good enough.*" In spite of this he expresses a desire to modify his reactions to teacher feedback as a way of recreating himself:

You can't just ditch it, and say you're done with it because that's the old you coming back up – you gotta try to work on the new you. I'll keep doing it again, even though I hate it. That's the only way you're going to learn though. I gotta learn how to take criticism. It sucks but I gotta do it.

He is conscious of his decision to resist the labels of 'statistic' and 'Speedbump' and focused on his desire to be a person with a voice and a brain – a 'headstrong student who can learn'. This person with a voice and a brain seems to always have existed, but in the past the voice was a shout that was never heard. His earlier insistence that the teacher's job was to 'learn

him' has been replaced by an emerging sense of 'learning himself' – he says he is discovering that the person he thought he was, the one who knew everything, has things to learn. He sees himself as older, wiser and smarter as a result of his life experiences and the 'something' that clicked in his brain. Intense passion and enthusiasm for learning and growing are infused in this narrative, as well as a powerful sense of hope and optimism.

The stories planted in Shawn: The stories he planted in himself

I'm a student with a lot to say but no one wants to hear what I have to say. I'm basically too different, too wrong and too bad for school. Teachers don't care about kids like me. I'm a Speedbump. A Speedbump is someone who slows down everyone else. Learning is about trying hard. I can try my hardest sometimes but my hardest is never good enough so the best way to be is to not care and mess everyone else up.

If this is the story Shawn planted in himself, is it the story he lives by today, or has he changed his story? I get a sense that he is in the midst of changing the story, but the themes of the story are hard to resist and hard to break away from. Trying his hardest still isn't good enough, but he is attempting to see that there may be ways to make use of what others have to offer to get closer to 'good enough' whatever that may be.

Discussion

This analysis of the participants' narratives of experiences and my own across time and context has made it possible for me to theorize about the stories that were planted through our school experiences. There are complex levels of alignment and conflict that emerge as I attempt to look from the present back and across these narratives of experience. Our lives, and the stories

that we tell, do not follow a linear progression that logically leads us from one chapter to the next – shadows and reflections and reverberations make themselves known, sometimes subtly and sometimes very clearly:

Memory doesn't work in a linear way, nor does life either, for that matter. Instead, thoughts and feelings circle around us; flash back, then forward; the topical is interwoven with the chronological; thoughts and feelings merge, drop from our grasp, then reappear in another context. (Ellis, 1999, p.675)

I am aware that these stories are not the 'whole story' of any of us. Each story is a snapshot – a glimmer of a reflected upon experience - with a beginning and an ending in one of the many moments that make up the story of our lives. This being said, what light can these narrative shed on the larger question of the impact of dominant Discourses of success on what each of us come to believe about ourselves as students and as people? When I consider the narratives in their entirety I see that the situated identities of *student* and *teacher* are profoundly characterized by the pervasiveness of evaluation that exists in the social reality of *school*. Our roles, our relationships and our personal realities are enmeshed in the webs of *e-value-ation* that are entrenched in the social institution that is the school of the present day. Implicit in the concept of *e-value-ation* is the reality that it is a relational concept. We evaluate and are evaluated *against* something, whether that something is our peers, an internal ideal, or an externally imposed standard. We are spoken into being in schools by the extent to which we are valued or devalued, valuable or worthless – not necessarily as one or the other, but we are clearly positioned along a continuum of value. The power of this positioning lives within us beyond the contexts of our schooling and influences our beliefs about ourselves as we move into the world of work, even

though beyond the context of school we are rarely evaluated and measured so officially or overtly.

The extent to which these theorizings of mine will speak to you, the reader, will be determined by the verisimilitude within the narratives, and will depend upon the extent to which each of you is able to connect with the experiences within or the feelings they evoke. It is my hope that each reader will view and consider actions and interactions in classrooms and the context and meaning of school with a renewed vigilance and critical awareness that comes from thinking of them in terms of the stories that are planted there.

Marks mark us. Grades grade us. Marks and grades position us.

As an integral aspect of the shared set of practices we enact in schools, teachers ‘mark’ and ‘grade’ products of student work. Marks and grades, though, become personal identifiers that we carry throughout our lives. We cannot distinguish between marks on our work and marks on ourselves. The symbols that grades attach to us identify us into categories of relative quality. Success and failure determine our access to the social goods of the classroom and the school.

This section pulls back from complete representations of narratives to incorporate a broader view of elements that emerged within and across them. A discussion of the ways that *marks mark us* and *grades grade us* enables me to answer another aspect of the original question that guided this inquiry: *How do narratives shared by Adult Basic Education students help us to understand Discourses of schooling, success, reporting and achievement?* This is where an examination of the words we use as we narrate ourselves sheds light on the ways that language reflects and constructs the social world of our school experiences.

Discourse analysis often entails intensely close analysis of the ‘bits’ of language used by speakers such as the level to which utterances are formal or informal, passive or active. When I denote Discourse with a capital ‘D’, I am indicating a broader view of language, following Gee (1999) who uses the capitalization of the word to indicate that there are identities and meanings that go along with certain ways of speaking and/or representing ourselves. Gee (2004) also asserts that Discourse incorporates notions of identity and the distribution of social goods, which connects to critical theory. I am applying Critical Discourse Analysis as a way of examining the shared set of meanings that are communicated institutionally through “systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution” (Kress, 1985, p. 6). An institution such as a school possesses sets of statements and shared meanings that convey messages to its members:

they crucially involve a set of values and viewpoints about the relationships between people and the distribution of social goods, at the very least, about who is an insider and who is not, often who is “normal” and who is not, and often, too, many other things as well. (Gee, 2008, p. 161)

These meanings, values and viewpoints are made personal when their impact at the human level is revealed. This is what is made possible through a consideration of the narratives that have been gathered together in this dissertation.

The institution of school possesses sets of statements and shared meanings around the language of evaluation that are personally articulated in our statements about success and failure. The foremost, and most obvious, set of statements that carry shared meanings around evaluation is the system of marks and grades that are applied to student work and officialised in report cards. Marks and grades, as discussed earlier, are commonly communicated in two key ways –

using the letters A – F or numbers, expressed as percentages or fractional scores such as 8/10 or 23/50. ‘A’ represents exceptional achievement, ‘F’ represents a lack of achievement. 100% or 10/10 represents perfection. Below 100%, each level of achievement denotes the extent to which a student, or a student’s work, has *not* represented perfection. Generally, an ‘F’ represents a failure to attain an educational standard – numerically, anywhere between 0 and 49%. On the surface, these numbers and letters represent a level of attainment in relation to standards or outcomes as determined by educational jurisdictions. Below the surface, embedded in the social practices of the classroom and the school, these numbers and letters offer us and society a means by which to determine our *relative* value. We express these values when we talk about being successes or being failures. A’s represent success. F’s represent failure.

There are other ‘texts’ that communicate evaluation messages to us aside from the marks we receive on report cards – these messages are embedded in the daily life of classrooms. Messages of success or failure, approval or disapproval - measurement messages - are communicated through a milieu of classroom circumstances. Comments and marks on student work serve as daily reinforcement of success or failure. ‘Bad’ work is often defaced with bold comments and red x’s, ‘good’ work is affixed with checks and stickers and stars. Many elementary classrooms post various versions of achievement charts that track students’ progress in learning tasks or competitions which serve as constant reminders of who is where on the continuum of achievement.

In myriad subtle and overt ways evaluative messages are also communicated through facial expressions, body language and comments such as, “Oh don’t worry, you’re just not good at math” or, “Good answer!” or, “No. That’s wrong. Does someone *else* have the right answer?” A man in his 40’s recently related a classic example of this to me. He told me a story of an

incident that happened during his kindergarten year. After completing an art project, the teacher held up his paper and said, “Would you just look at the mess Patrick made!” The teacher’s message to Patrick and to the rest of the class was that his art project had no value and the 40 year old man who told me the story has never lost the feeling that he had no value in that place. Messages are conveyed when students’ work is displayed on public bulletin boards such as the ‘Stellar Speller’ board I was so eager to adorn. When some children are sent off to play while others are forced to remain at their desks to keep working, the children at the desks receive the message that they are not as successful as the children playing. Such messages pervade classroom interactions and can have enduring impacts.

Marks mark us

What the narratives reveal at the personal level is a multitude of connotations that accompany notions of failure. Failing is something we do, and something that is done to us. It is rarely perceived that the products of a learning event have failed; it is more often interpreted that the person has failed, sometimes to the extent that the notion of *person* itself becomes *failure*. This notion first emerges in my narrative of First Reports, when I struggled to make my determinations about Alice’s scores:

When I look along the row of marks I have for Alice, I see them neatly laid out, 5/10, 12/20, 4/10, 13/30 and so on. No matter how many times I add and average with my calculator, I end up with the same dismal averages – 52% in Math, 55% in Language Arts, 48% in Social Studies. I have to reassure myself that the numbers in the book don’t lie. If I’ve kept faithful records - and I have - then she’s earned these failing marks. Even though I’ve spent all term encouraging Alice, helping her to see the things she is learning to do, I am forced to record C-, D, and F into my book. The marks don’t lie. My

colleagues would tell me to rely on my judgment. This student is below average, that's all there is to it. I have to fail her.

When I express my regret at the inevitability of the grades I assign, I talk about failing *her*, not about failing her work. When I say, “I have to fail her” I also wonder if I’m directing the reference to myself, as the one who failed her...the one who let her down by not giving her what she needed, or am I talking about failing her, in that *she* failed? These contradictory and complicated messages around failing and being failed appear in many places in the narratives.

When Andrew received a ‘D’ on his Science test, the thought that occurred to him was not, “I failed my test”, but “I failed my Dad” accompanied by his feelings about the inevitability of repeating this act, “I’m just going to fail again.” Hannah’s representations about failure are predominantly passive. As she said, “When I think about it now, it’s like they just pushed me through to get me out of the way.” She embodied her failure and became something/someone disposable – someone to get out of the way. Shawn also expressed this passivity when he said, “They just pushed me through school.”

Amber received report cards full of failure messages that were confounded between evaluations of her and her work. As she said, “Basically all my report cards said pretty much the same thing, ‘She’s a nice quiet student and she could apply herself more.’ followed by a lot of E’s and F’s.” The implication is that if Amber would ‘apply herself more’, she wouldn’t be receiving the E’s and F’s. The implication is that she failed herself through her lack of application. Despite the efforts of her mother to communicate the message that notions of failure could be disrupted, “My Mom would say, “Oh honey, E is for Effort and F is for Fabulous!” her father confirmed the judgment that was conveyed in the report when he attached the grade to her ‘self’ by saying, “You are such a failure.” Amber then took up the label of *failure* as an identifier

and shifted its expression into an active statement of choice. “Okay well fine I’ll *be* a failure then if that’s what you think of me - I’ll live up to your standards Dad!”

At times Shawn attaches the notion of failure to his work:

I remember trying my hardest on some of the math tests and spelling tests and walking away thinking that I did good then the next day looking at the card. It would say things like Incomplete, Fail, Not Good Enough, Try Harder.

Failure was something that was done *to* him in the same way his marks were given *to* him by various unknown entities. “Who was the one that said back then that I wasn’t good enough and gave the marks?” he asked. In other statements the label ‘failure’ applied to his identity, or self, “...if you’re not getting straight A’s and participating in school activities like the chess club then you’re a failure.” In statements such as this, it is not Shawn’s work that is a failure, it is him. In other statements he took up the labels that associated him with failure and shifted them to become his choices, although they are stated as choices he was forced into, “Okay whatever. They already think I’m a speed bump. So you want me to be like this I’ll be like this. If you call me a statistic and a speed bump then I’m going to be a statistic.”

Another way of understanding Discourses of evaluation is to examine the ways we articulate success. In my own narratives, success was signalled by the stickers and checks and ‘Good’s that adorned my schoolwork and the posting of my work on public display. Successful kids are the ‘Grade A kids’ as Shawn calls them and the ‘Straight A’s’ or the ‘Bluebirds’ as Amber calls them, referring to the ubiquitous names that were used to identify the most advanced reading groups. Andrew doesn’t see success as a personification, but as a possible feeling. To him, a successful moment does not make for success – success is a long-term status that connotes acceptance and belonging:

I might have had successful moments but I don't remember ever feeling successful. If you ask me to define a successful kid, it would be the kid who everyone likes. He gets decent grades, the teacher loves him, he doesn't get beat up or annoyed or bothered by other people.

Success is a status that is conferred by 'A's as much as failure is a status that is conferred by F's. It is a label that becomes a personification. The key understanding that these contradictory messages confer, in reference to Critical Discourse Analysis, is that they are concepts that are not descriptors of the quality of student products of learning; they are descriptors of the person and markers of their identity. The A's and F's that denote success or failure are marks that mark our being. Shawn expressed this very directly when he said

You ask me if a mark on a report card is a mark on me. Here's what I say to that; it totally is. It totally is. It's just picking people apart and no longer calling them people. It's calling them letters and names like you're letter A cause you get straight A's.

In the spirit of close examination of language I would like to consider this notion a little further. The word 'mark' is ubiquitous in schools. We often hear, "Is this for marks?" or "This will be worth 25 marks" or, "What mark did you get?" or "Did you get our tests marked?" It is interesting to consider the multiple connotations of the word, particularly when considering the complexities of success and failure. A mark may be a symbol that is written onto paper, such as an X that is written with a red pen, but I also wonder about the marks that are made on *us* by the marks that are on papers and report cards. To take this notion a little further, marks are made on our bodies by various sorts of insult to the skin – bruises, brands, cuts or tattoos. A mark that is made intentionally on the skin is also called a *stigma*. This sort of a mark on the skin is a sign of disgrace originally used by the Ancient Greeks to signify people's status as slaves, criminals, or

traitors and to indicate that they were blemished, ritually polluted, and to be avoided, especially in public places (“stigma,”2009). The marks we receive in school aren’t as overt as these stigma from Ancient Greece, but it can be argued that the marks of failure that students receive in school mark them with a particular sort of status – a ‘stigma’ which is an ‘undesired differentness’ (Goffman, Lemert, & Branaman, 1997) that is branded onto them.

Grades grade us

Success and failure are relational concepts. They are expressions of relative value, not independent descriptors. When I say grades *grade* us I refer to the ways in which we are categorized and classified into levels of quality, much the way eggs and frozen peas and orange juice are graded. Once again, Shawn’s critique is insightful. Either intentionally or unintentionally, he referred to the successful kids as the ‘Grade A’ kids. When I wrote about failing Alice, I said, “This student is below average, that’s all there is to it. I have to fail her.” In this statement her failure is directly connected to her status of below average – it is automatically associated with relative positioning in the class. Failure, then, is something that happens in relation to the achievement of others, not independent of them. To Amber, the successful girl that was not allowed to play with her was ‘a stuck up snob’ – a term that colloquially refers to superior financial and social status. When Amber talked about the notion of competition in schools, she referred to the bird groups:

I sometimes think about what’s been drilled into us since we were young – that everybody has to compete. There are these groups – you know, like the bird groups? The Buzzards are here and the Bluebirds are there because they’re doing better and you’re always sitting there thinking, “Why can’t I be like that?”

The implication that these words reveals is that being a Bluebird means being something pretty and desirable, while Amber belongs with the ugly and undesirable Buzzards.

Kids who are successful are seen to have power over kids who are not. As Shawn said, “they were the ones banging on us for not being as smart” or in Amber’s words, “if you showed any little flaw, kids would take that and torment you or pick on you about it.” For Andrew, the successful kids were placed in a category that made it so that “everyone likes them” and “the teacher loves them”. They are quality, while failing kids are defective, second best, like frozen utility turkeys that don’t earn Grade A status because they are missing a wing or a leg. Hannah’s comment that “it’s like they just pushed me through to get me out of the way” is also indicative of a positioning of lesser quality. She became an object that needed to be ‘got out of the way’. When Amber described her high school student self, she said, “It’s almost like a building block was missing. ...It’s like a key component is missing – you feel something is not there.” These machinated and architectural metaphors point to the relative value of each of us when compared against a whole building, a machine that works or a student who is Grade A.

Marks and grades position us.

Goffman’s (1959) notion of stigma as undesired differentness is also relevant to a consideration of the social positioning that is embedded in the words the participants used to narrate themselves. Stigma is an inherently relational concept. We cannot be stigmatized, says Goffman, except in negative relation to those around us. He asserts that those with stigma depart negatively from the ‘others’ in their social situations; these ‘others’ he refers to as *normals*. In various social situations there are *normals* and there are those who they are normal *against*. These notions of *stigma*, *normal* and *normal against* take on a specific set of meanings when we consider them in the context of the institution of schooling and the intimations of social

languages and social practices that are embedded in these narratives. The dominant Discourses that position students “ involve a set of values and viewpoints about relationships, distribution of social goods, who is an insider and who is not, who is normal and who is not” (Gee, 2008, p.161).

Failures are positioned on the outside; successes are positioned on the inside. Successes are positioned at the top; Failures are positioned at the bottom. Failures are positioned to the left of the bell curve; successes are positioned to the right (Cooper, 2009). A bell curve represents a ‘normal’ distribution of levels of intelligence. To be positioned to the left on the bell curve is outside of normal, as is positioning on the right, but to be on the right is to be on the ‘right’ side of normal. To be a failure in school is to be positioned on the outside of normal, which places you on the outside of belonging.

The actualization of these ideas is evident in several places in the narratives. The classmates who populate these remembered classrooms are described as a mass of ‘they’ or as ‘everyone else’, ‘everybody’ and ‘all the other kids’. Often it is implied that all of ‘them’ are successful students, positioned away from the participants who are alone in their position of failure. The positioning of the failing student in my First Reports narrative was evident to me on my first day of teaching. *“Alice stood out right away. It was obvious within the first hour that she was shunned by the other students. She was quiet, mousy and withdrawn, set apart by a refusal of the others to acknowledge her presence.”*

Amber referred often to ‘everyone else’ from a positioning on the outside. Her early sense of this positioning came as she watched her classmates in Grade 1:

All the other kids would get busily down to work, their heads bent over the paper, pencils working away at forming letters and filling in blanks, mouthing words as

they read. I would watch them zipping along while I stared blankly at the work in front of me. "How do they know what to do?" I wondered, "Why can't I be like that?"

Her sense of 'not belonging' is reinforced by what she said about repeating Grade 1:

When they broke the news to me that I'd be repeating Grade 1, I thought, "Here I am failing and I'm coming back next year and there are all these desks and there is not going to be a desk for me." This early inkling of her positioning is poignantly expressed as a feeling that there wouldn't be a desk for her when she returned as a student who had failed, so where would she be? Where do failing students go? There was a desk for her that following year, and a new teacher, but a familiar scenario which was "everybody does it this way. Everybody follows along with the group" and "the rest went out to play" while she was left inside.

Hannah's perception of her positioning is revealed in her descriptions as well, "She piled extra work on me, even though she knew I had troubles. She didn't treat me the same as the other kids" When she was forced to miss the movie, "Everyone else got to watch it."

Shawn and Hannah both talk about the 'regular' classes and the 'normal' classes as the classes where the other kids went and they were occasionally given permission to attend, although Hannah had her helpers along when she was in those regular classes, who hovered and helped while reinforcing her position as they "weren't even helping the other kids." Shawn was literally on the outside when he, "spent most of my time at that school just wandering the halls while the other kids were in class" and capped it off when he "went and got all drunk and ruined everybody's day." In the language Shawn uses, kids who have 'F's are sorted through and set apart which he expressed as, "This kids doing good, this kids doing good, this kid's got an F and

was cast onto the side.” Being ‘cast onto the side’ carries strong connotations of the position of outcast that he associates with failure.

Very few references to ‘we’ or ‘us’ stand out in the narratives, and those that do, reinforce positioning outside of success and outside of normal. Shawn described his special placement in Grade 7 when “they put me in another class with a bunch of kids like me” and when he talked about attacking the Grade A kids because

they were the ones banging on us for not being as smart. They were the ones making fun of us and we got back at them for making fun of us because we’re not as smart as them. We got them back.

He talks about *his* group being the ‘us’ and the mass of ‘regular’ or successful kids as the ‘them’ – again his positioning on the outside because of his lack of achievement is reinforced through the language he uses.

To be positioned on the inside means having access to the social goods of school such as belonging, as the previous references allude to, as well as status, the teacher’s love, the esteem of peers and access to special privileges. In Andrew’s words, the successful kid is “the kid who everyone likes. He gets decent grades, the teacher loves him, he doesn’t get beat up or annoyed or bothered by other people.” By implication, these are social goods that he did not have access to. My own narratives revealed several references to the social goods I had access to as a successful student such as the love of the Grade 2 teacher, stickers and stars, and the ability to get away with behavioural indiscretions such as cheating on the spelling test and submitting incomplete assignments without consequence. My Graduation narrative clearly depicts the financial awards that accompany success in school. Shawn describes the privileges of the Grade A kids such as membership in the ‘chess club’.

The perception that access to privileges is denied to unsuccessful students is clearly illustrated in several places in Amber's narratives. She was denied privileges such as access to recess breaks when she was kept in to work, stories at the carpet, and the privilege of going home straight after school. In Hannah's 'Missing the Titanic' narrative she was denied the privilege of watching the movie while 'everyone else' got to watch it.

When we 'zoom in' and take a closer look at the ideas we convey and the words and that we use as we narrate ourselves, we are able to glimpse the social worlds that are reflected and constructed in these contexts by our use of language as a social practice. I must again concede the point that these are the narratives of five people, but the messages that these words convey speak to the experiences of students in every school. The 'we' that each of us embodies in our cultural milieu demands that we consider each individual narrative as potentially representative of the story of the self that is being constructed by students like Amber and Shawn and Andrew and Hannah and me every day and every year. The social world of isolation, stigma, disempowerment and devaluation that are characterized in these narratives offer urgent and telling messages to all of us. Awareness of these processes can firstly help us to see them, secondly help us to prevent them, or at the very least discuss them, thus reducing their power.

Chapter 6: Conditions for growth

Implications

As a teacher educator I have the privilege of spending time in many classrooms. At times I am supporting and supervising student teachers. At other times I am using classrooms as a place to help my students bridge theory and practice in assessment courses or I am researching and supporting the work of classroom teachers as they seek to shift their assessment practices. The following narrative is a composite representation of some of the classrooms I have visited in the past few years. It speaks to the urgent need to help teachers and student teachers to become ‘assessment literate’ and to develop an understanding of the impact of assessment and evaluation practices on children in classrooms.

I find myself back in Grade 1 this week. I’m sitting off to the side of the class as an objective observer of the teaching that is happening here. It is my responsibility to decide if this student teacher is ready to be certified. As I sit here, taking notes on things like the structure of the lesson, the distribution of questioning and the classroom management strategies that are being employed; I get caught up in my enjoyment of children and my curiosity about their school experiences. When I am in a supervisory role, I often try to experience the teaching from the students’ perspective and try to get a sense of how they are reacting to the teacher and to the content being presented.

The children are gathered at the front of the room, sitting in rows on the floor while the student teacher demonstrates the concept she wants them to learn. I crane my neck to see the children; my view is obscured by the rows of desks between them and me. I can see parts of their little backs and heads as they sit facing the student teacher. I can hear their reedy voices as they

try to offer the right answers to her questions. The questioning follows a predictable pattern of 'guess what's in the teacher's head' and you'll be right. When the demonstration is over they are given worksheets and they begin to straggle back toward their desks. I notice that some children have different coloured papers than others. I hear the student teacher say, "I made the sheets different colours just to make it interesting." I watch one little girl as she obtains her worksheet and walks back to her desk which is close to where I'm sitting. "Waaah!" she exclaims to no one in particular, "I got put back into the yellow group!" My ears perk up instantly when I hear this. What can she possibly mean? Where did she get the idea that different colours mean different levels of ability, and that the 'yellow' group is somewhere she doesn't want to be? I watch with growing fascination as the children settle in to working on their variably-coloured worksheets.

After ten minutes or so, some of the children indicate that they are finished and are given permission to play with toys in various parts of room. I see others collect plastic counters to help them finish the addition and subtraction questions that fill the sheet. After 20 minutes most of the children are playing while five of them (the ones with the yellow sheets) are still working. As they use the counters and slowly work their way through the problems, the adults in the room circulate among the desks 'ticking' and 'x-ing' the right and wrong answers. As they move from desk to desk, each child gets out his eraser, rubs out the wrong answers and takes up the counters again. Rarely do I see one of the adults in the room kneel down to offer assistance – ticking and x-ing seem to be their key function. After 45 minutes, three of the children are still working on the problems while the rest of the class leaves for the day. Two of them take until 20 minutes after the bell has rung to finish their sheets before they are allowed to go home. My mind is racing. I can't help thinking about Amber and Hannah and Andrew and Shawn and the

stories they have been telling me. I think, particularly, about Amber's stories – Grade 1 experiences vividly recalled many years later. What are these little people coming to know about themselves as they sit in those desks? Has so little changed?

A climate of measurement and evaluation pervades these classrooms. Sitting in classrooms such as these has a powerful impact on me as I consider the stories that are unfolding therein. It is also an experience that is confirming. It confirms my assertion that we as teachers need to examine the assumptions that underlie the beliefs that guide our practice. Unexamined practices such as blithely ticking and 'x-ing' student work without offering formative support and punishing students through the denial of privileges such as play time and breaks because of their inability to complete tasks in a set amount of time create a reality for students that potentially replicates that which was experienced by the participants in this study.

I can't help but imagine Shawn or Andrew sitting in those desks, watching the others play while they keep erasing their answers and trying again, or Amber or Hannah, working away in a quiet classroom after the other students have gone outside for recess or home for the day. As a result of engaging deeply with their narratives, I am compelled to consider the story of the self that these Grade 1 students are constructing as they are continually reminded of their inability to 'keep up' with the rest of the students. As early as Grade 1, it is evident that there are rewards and punishments that go along with the ability to be 'quick' or not, to 'apply yourself' or not, to 'get it' or not.

Implications for students

This inquiry has helped to illuminate the impacts of classroom climates such as these on what students come to believe about themselves. A close examination of these experiences has revealed various ways in which the situated identity of self as student is 'planted' in many ways

by the evaluative moments that we experience in school. These evaluative moments are far more pervasive than the isolated moments of receiving ‘marks’ and ‘grades’ – they are part of the very fabric of positivistic, measurement-oriented classrooms. Students learn to typify themselves as successes or failures and to depend on teachers to provide the messages that determine their value as opposed to making those determinations themselves. This is as true of ‘successful’ students as it is of ‘unsuccessful’ students. As Gipps (1999) has written, the judgment of others in our classroom environments is central to our developing sense of who we are:

If identity is conceived as concerned with persuading others and oneself about who one is, the judgment of others is crucial. Simultaneously reflecting and observing, the individual evaluates himself or herself "in the light of what he [or she] perceives to be [the] way in which others judge him [or her] in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them" (Erikson, 1968, p. 22). Indeed, following Bernstein's argument about the pervasiveness of covert, informal assessment, it may be that the teacher's regular classroom-based assessment of the pupil has more impact on identity formation than the results of standardized tests and formal examinations or report cards. (p. 386)

The implications of this insight are, in some ways, discouraging. The situations that have been narrated and examined throughout this dissertation reassert this point over and over again - the ‘pervasiveness of covert, informal assessment’ is embedded in the daily life of myriad classrooms. Its subtle overtones constitute the fabric, the culture, the ethos of school – so much so that it is difficult to draw attention to it. It is so much ‘the way things are’ that it is difficult to question, yet I feel an urgency to do just that. It is time to surface and examine the assumptions

that lead each of us to believe that others should be empowered to measure and attribute value to us. Stories of our school experiences need to be told, shared, examined and discussed. A sharing and examination of stories – of these stories and the stories that all of us carry within us – may provide a starting place for students to rethink the ‘rightness’ of these school experiences in light of current understandings of what schooling could be. As Foucault (1977) stated, such stories can be ‘transgressive’ and help us to call into question our attitudes about prevailing social practices.

Another implication of this work is a clarion call for students to be included in assessment processes rather than continuing to be the objects of them. If students can learn to become aware of the tools and processes that support their own learning and be provided with formative assessment information such as descriptive feedback, clear learning intentions and exemplars of quality work, they can become participants in the assessment/learning process and more empowered to resist disabling messages they may receive in school. If students can be immersed in assessment processes that are designed to support progress towards mastery of learning targets rather than measuring them against norms, they can begin to achieve control over their learning processes and to advocate for themselves in school situations. This change requires a shift in power dynamics in classrooms.

The didactic relationship between teacher and student is traditionally a hierarchical one and the assessment relationship one of judgment or surveillance. If we are serious about taking an interpretive approach and bringing the student into some ownership of the assessment process (and hence into self-evaluation), teachers must share power with students rather than exerting power over them. (Gipps, 1999, p. 386)

This is not an easy transition for students to make. Awareness of one's own learning processes is a mindset that needs to be nurtured if students are to be able to understand themselves as learners and to learn to value their own judgments rather than being intensely reliant upon the judgments of others. Likewise, the ability to self assess is a skill to be learned. With these skills and mindsets students can then begin to be able to self assess and make decisions that increase their likelihood of experiencing increased self efficacy and confidence.

When students become involved in assessment processes their achievement and their confidence increase significantly (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b, Black et al., 2004; Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002) and they are better able to “use assessment information to manage their own learning, to understand how they learn best and how to take next steps” (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002, p. 41). As they move forward in their lives, students need to use their own talents and knowledge to solve problems. As Earl (2003) says, “they can't just wait for the teacher (or politicians, or salespeople, or religious leaders) to tell them whether or not the answer is ‘right’” (p. 25). These skills are essential for all students to develop if they are to become self-reliant, thoughtful citizens.

When students are ‘brought in’ to assessment processes, relationships between teachers and students are altered. “Student self-assessment serves cognitive purposes, then, but it also promises to increase students' responsibility for their own learning and to make the relationship between teachers and students more collaborative” (Shepard, 2000, p. 12). The participants in this study made repeated assertions that they felt unsupported, un-cared-for and misunderstood throughout their school careers. I believe that a more collaborative relationship between students and teachers has the potential to prevent situations such as these. As students take on

responsibility for their own learning and ownership of assessment processes, their relationships with teachers can become more mutually respectful and less hierarchically structured.

A key implication is that we shift away from using schools as places to create standardized products out of students towards encouraging the development of ‘Strong Poets’ in our classrooms:

A strong poet is someone who refuses to accept as useful the descriptions of her life written by others. Instead, the strong poet is a strong storyteller, continuously revising her life story in the light of her own experience and imagination. The strong poet constantly redescribes her past interactions with the world around her, constantly reinvents her self, so that she may act in the future with ever greater integrity and coherence. The strong poet plots her life story toward her own emergent ends and purposes. (Barone, 2000, p. 125)

A strong poet has the ability to write the chapters of her school/life story as a result of careful nurturance and guidance that helps her to become her self as she is becoming rather than the self that others have decided that she is.

Analysis of the experiences of the participants in this study also helped me to see the ways in which struggling students felt excluded and separate within their classrooms. The sense of isolation and devaluation that these students experienced has implications for the ways that we work with diverse learners in classrooms. Many schools continue to offer support for struggling students through ‘pull out’ learning assistance programs, which has the potential to accentuate the feelings of isolation that these students experience. There is much potential for working with diverse learners in ‘non-categorical’ resource models where specialized learning assistance is offered within classrooms by support teachers who work alongside classroom teachers in ways

that offer more success for more students and provide an increased sense of belonging for all students (Brownlie et al., 2006). Another way to reduce feelings of isolation and devaluation in classrooms is to work towards a ‘Community of Learners’ ideal, where interdependency, a shared vision that supports the learning of all members of the class and a respect for a diversity of learning styles and academic abilities are valued and promoted by classroom teachers (Epps, Armstrong, & Fisher, 2010).

Implications for teachers

When teachers use strictly summative and evaluative assessment practices, they reflect understandings of teaching, learning, truth and knowledge that are rooted in a positivist paradigm that assumes that it is beneficial to measure all products of student work and to presume that these products and the symbols teachers attach to them reflect an accurate measurement of student learning. An implication of this assertion is that teachers need to be provided with opportunities to reflect on their practice and to examine the assumptions that underlie many traditional evaluation practices. Much of the current literature about the benefits of formative assessment is fairly recent and many teachers have not had access to, or made use of, appropriate forms of professional development that would provide them with opportunities to deeply engage with ideas and intensively reflect on their practice and the impacts of their assessment and evaluation practices on students.

In a study that Black et al. (2004) initiated shortly after the widely acclaimed *Inside the Black Box* (Black & Wiliam, 1998a) was released, teachers were invited to choose one formative assessment strategy to employ in their classrooms for an extended period. At various intervals, the teachers gathered together to work with the researchers and to discuss the impacts of their use of the strategy. A fascinating finding that emerged from the research was that after a short period

of time, teachers began to realize that the use of one formative assessment strategy was shifting the whole of their practice. They came back to the researchers and requested to learn more about the psychology of learning that guided the use of formative assessment so that they could deepen their understanding of teaching and learning. These teachers were developing an awareness of the gaps in their conceptual understanding about learning itself and were seeking to redress it.

The task of changing assessment practice is much more complex than this scenario may imply. Few teachers begin their careers feeling prepared to enact the roles of assessor and evaluator. As a result, they tend to fall back on the assessment practices they experienced in their school life and to replicate out-dated modes of practice (Earl, 2003). Many teachers in classrooms today entered the profession well before the emergence of theories around formative assessment and constructivist classrooms were well known. In addition

Despite the amount of research evidence that testifies to the shortcomings of many assessment techniques as a means of measuring educational achievement, existing assessment practices are so deeply rooted in our collective intellectual and political consciousness that they have been almost impossible to challenge. (Earl, 2003, p.11)

This shift – from thinking of assessment as a measurement process to thinking of it as a part of learning processes – is a difficult one to make, as it

will challenge many educators' fundamental beliefs about their work and about education, and it will require of them new knowledge and skills.... The success of embedding and sustaining any serious alteration to classroom practice depends on changes in the hearts and minds of individual teachers, administrators, and district or division leaders. (Earl & Katz, 2006, p. 67)

Changing hearts and minds is a daunting prospect. Challenging our fundamental beliefs about education is a sensitive task that will take time and sustained effort on the part of teachers, school leaders and policy makers. Traditional forms of professional development such as one-day workshops have proven to have little effect on initiating and sustaining significant changes in practice (Guskey, 2002). The emergence of professional learning communities appears to be a positive catalyst for teachers to improve their assessment literacy and to gain confidence in using assessment to support learning in their classrooms. Models for professional development that are contextualized by practice, driven by inquiry and choice, focused on student learning and collaborative in nature are currently promoted in British Columbia and in various jurisdictions across North America (Dufour, Eaker & Dufour, 2005; Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The potential of professional learning communities to shift teacher practice and improve learner success is beginning to be explored in many jurisdictions and early results indicate that these approaches have great potential to support teachers in shifting their assessment practices (Fullan, 2000).

Teachers entering the profession also need opportunities to examine their assumptions about teaching and learning and to learn about recent developments in assessment and evaluation. Very few teacher education programs offer courses that provide student teachers with the ‘assessment literacy’ that is required to determine how to use assessment processes to move beyond the measurement of student learning towards support for student learning (Brookhart, 2001; Stiggins, 2002). More teacher education programs need to ensure that pre service teachers enter into their teaching practice with a solid grounding in learning theory and assessment literacy. This will enable new teachers to begin their careers with a mindset that is focused on using assessment and evaluation processes that are integrally linked to teaching and learning and that seek to continually support student learning. A mindset focused on support of learning is a

starting place. Teacher education programs also need to help their students to develop the complex array of skills and knowledge that will support their endeavours to teach and learn with their students in constructivist learning environments, and to develop an intention to continue their own learning journeys throughout their careers in education.

When I consider patterns of power and powerlessness that emerged through the narratives, my attention is drawn to the multiple layers of power that hold traditional evaluative practices in place. Most evident is the power that is invested in teachers that enables them to carry out these measurement duties. Teacher's judgements are rarely questioned, and teachers are seldom asked to justify their evaluation practices and grading procedures. The markings on papers and the grades that students receive come from the teacher as if by magic. They emerge from the 'black box' of the classroom and are often accepted as the 'truth' about the value reflected by the students' abilities (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Earl, 2003). Students are most often passive recipients of evaluations, trusting in their teachers' ability to divine their value. The report cards that emerge from this 'black box' deliver messages of students' value to parents who are informed, through the evaluations provided to them, whether or not their child is a success or a failure.

Students and parents need to learn more about the assessment and grading practices that their teachers are using. It is teachers' responsibility to ensure that students and parents are brought in to the conversation and informed about their grading practices. It should no longer be assumed that grades are 'delivered' to students without parents and students having the opportunity to understand how their grades are determined and to be involved in conversations that help them to understand next steps in the learning process that will support and enhance student success (A. Davies, 2000; Earl, 2003; O'Connor, 2002).

Teachers are invested with the power to measure and evaluate, but this role is perceived by many as a duty, not a choice. Within the structure of the public institution of school, teachers are mandated to use letter grades and numerical markings to measure and report on student learning. In this way, teachers' attempts to support student learning are often subverted by institutional and departmental policies. One of Stiggins' assertions is that teachers have the power to initiate change at the classroom level - without having to wait for systems of education to change (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). Teachers who are seeking solutions to the problem of the conflicting tensions between policies that demand grades and the desire to implement formative assessment are finding that separating assessment and evaluation processes as much as possible helps teachers as well as students to focus more on learning and less on measuring and ranking (Black et al., 2004; Cooper, 2007; Elbow, 1993).

I would like to go so far as to advocate that we remove letter grades and evaluative symbols such as numbers and percentage scores from our assessment processes entirely. As O'Connor (2002) and Cooper (2007) assert, grades are not essential for learning. The grading systems that we use are steeped in historical precedent, but are, in my opinion, unnecessary. What teachers need to do is focus on support for student learning. What students need to do is focus on learning. My assertion is that the removal of evaluative symbols from the assessment relationship that exists between students and teachers has the potential to substantially shift our perspectives about what learning is and what school is.

Implications for researchers

This dissertation combined various forms of narrative research and analysis in an attempt to create a cohesively narrative approach to understanding the meaning of the experiences of participants. It was not my initial intent to place the autoethnographies alongside the co-

autoethnographies, yet I feel that my decision to do so strengthened the authenticity of the interpretations that I drew from the participants' narratives. As a researcher, the construction of my own narratives helped me to create a more authentic tone in the participants' narratives as I was able to reflect on my own experiences in narrative ways and consider the differences between actual events and the meaning of events. This strategy also helped to clearly position my researcher's stance. I recommend it as an explicit means of revealing the assumptions and perspectives that educational researchers bring to their examinations of school experience.

I believe that the collaborative spirit that I brought to the story-sharing sessions and the construction of the narratives helped to make the research process a rewarding one for the participants. It was never my intention to view them as the 'subjects' of my research and the discussions that ensued at every stage of the process indicated to me that the participants felt that their perspectives were valued. This valuing of their perspectives helped to open spaces for them to express their hopes for the future of this work and to feel some ownership in the process. To me, this is evidence of the potentially "reality altering impact of the research process" (Lather, 1986, p. 67). I urge researchers to bring open-mindedness, humility and respect to the research environment, particularly when researching the experiences of those we may consider to be less privileged than ourselves. Participants in our research are the experts of their experiences and their interpretations of these experiences have great potential to increase our understanding of the social world.

Societal and systems-level implications

At a societal level, historical precedent and a familiarity with institutional structures that are inherent in schools create an acceptance of institutionally-bound practices that is based on

nothing more than a sense of what is ‘normal’ that is derived from the shared experience that most adults had with their own schooling (Robinson, 2005). As Kaser and Halbert (2009) assert, “in schools worldwide the industrial model of schooling is, sadly, still very apparent” (p. 12). This institutional/industrial model reinforces modernist/positivist assumptions that support the ranking and sorting of students into hierarchies of academic achievement (Cooper, 1981; Foucault, 1977; Schrag, 1999). These rankings and sortings are based on a narrow conception of what is ‘useful’ knowledge and of what intelligence is. This is another assumption that demands to be examined if we are to avoid the continued marginalization of students who possess abilities that fall outside of what traditional school structures consider to be ‘academic’ subjects (Robinson, 2005). As Sir Ken Robinson asserts, our education systems are built upon notions of conformity, standardization, linearity and mechanisms that devalue the students within them and limit possibilities for creativity. This devaluation is not necessarily deliberate, he says, but it is *systematic* (2010).

What are needed are new conceptions of the role of schools and innovative rethinking of the structure of schools and the purposes of schooling itself:

Schools and districts are caught in an era with the contradictory purposes of ‘education for all’ and ‘education as gatekeeper’ with control of the nature of goals and rewards.

Teachers and administrators are the instruments of these contradictory demands and are both recipients and perpetrators of these competing messages. (Earl, 2003, p. 11)

What is needed is a reordering of values and a *re-value*-ing of the recipients of school, the students themselves. As we learn to move away from the conception of assessment as science, and students as objects of scientific processes, we may create openings that allow us to glimpse

the complexities of teaching, learning, assessment and evaluation, and the complexities of the ‘selves’ that are evolving within our school systems.

There are significant movements developing that are attempting to shift the mindsets of teachers, leaders and policymakers away from the notion of schooling as a process of ranking and sorting and towards a mindset of learning for each and every student (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). My hope is that there is a new paradigm for education that is emerging in which classrooms will become places that embody the spirit of a community of learners who are dedicated to learning and creating and committed to embracing the diversity that exists in classrooms and beyond. I have seen glimpses of classrooms that reflect this hope.

The following is a composite narrative of some other sorts of classrooms I have been visiting recently.

I take my students teachers on an assessment field trip. My intention is for them to witness the ways that formative assessment can be embedded in instructional practice, so we go en masse to a local elementary school to sit in an exemplary classroom. A group of us file into a Grade 7 classroom and station ourselves around the edges of the room. We are invited to act as observers while the teacher prepares the students for this working session, then we are permitted to observe student and teacher conversations, or to move throughout the room and interact with the students while they are working. The student desks are arranged in clusters of four to six. Books, note sheets, and large sheets of paper fill the working spaces created by the grouping of the desks. Today’s task, the teacher says, is for each student to meet with two partners in their ‘expert’ group to be sure that each of them is ready for a group meeting with the teacher. They are to refer to the criteria that are posted on the wall, and use a strategy called ‘APE’ wherein each student has a role in reviewing the work of the others – Adviser, Presenter and Encourager.

In this way, they share what they have learned with each other so that each of them can attend the meeting with information to share.

Once each student feels prepared for the meeting, they are to work on their mind maps. One group at a time is to attend an 'info circle' meeting with the teacher while the others are working. The students settle in and a productive buzz pervades the room. I can hear students sharing information and giving each other feedback on their work in progress.

At the back of the room the first group gathers around a large table with the teacher and the meeting begins. Students are sharing their expert knowledge on aspects of Ancient Rome from the note sheets they have brought to the meeting. As each student shares her information, the others add to their notes or ask questions. Throughout the meeting the teacher facilitates the discussion by providing descriptive feedback, asking probing questions and inviting responses from each member of the group. At the end of the meeting, the students complete a self assessment of their group participation then go back to their desks. Their first task is to write a 'reflective write' on what they learned during the meeting, and then they are to move on to adding features to their mind maps and gathering information for their individual inquiry projects.

In addition, each student is involved in gathering samples of work in a portfolio to prepare for an 'elbow-to-elbow' conference with the teacher. During these conferences, the teacher explains, they will be discussing the term's marks by reviewing work samples and criteria together.

As an observer, I scan the room to see what sorts of activities the students are involved in and to discern the level of engagement. I am immediately struck by the environment of collaborative productivity and purposeful focus that pervades the room. When I ask students

about their work, they are eager to talk about their inquiries. Each of them has chosen a topic of inquiry that has personal relevance for them and connects to a larger class inquiry. They talk with me about the processes that are supporting their learning such as clear criteria, teacher and peer feedback and a focus on learning goals. I am astonished at these students' ability to talk about their own learning processes and I am consistently impressed by the enthusiasm and ownership they express in relation to their work in school.

The teacher in this classroom has developed a small network of teachers within her school and at other schools in her district, and they are collaborating to inquire into their own practices and to develop powerful learning environments for their students. Their work is having a significant impact on the learners in their classrooms as well as on their own understanding of teaching/learning processes. In these classrooms, the theories around the positive impact of fully integrated assessment and teaching/learning processes with an emphasis on formative assessment and a de-emphasis on evaluation are playing out in practice. All students in this particular classroom express confidence in their ability to learn and many are able to articulate insightful observations about their learning strengths and needs. I am inspired and heartened by what I see here, and will do everything I can to support this work.

Classrooms like these do exist, and there is great potential in the work that these teachers and these students are engaged in. If I try to visualize the participants in this inquiry in the classroom described in this scenario I see the potential for very different outcomes for students who face learning challenges as they did and for students who find school-related tasks easy, as I did. I have been pleased to discover classrooms like these that reflect very closely the constructivist classrooms described in various sections of this dissertation. There is a strong sense of purpose among teachers and students, significant emphasis on ownership of, and

responsibility for learning on the part of the students, and a collaborative, less hierarchical relationship exists between students and teachers. An environment such as this has the potential to foster the emergence of ‘strong poets’ (Barone, 2000) who are confident in their abilities and able to advocate for themselves beyond the bounds of this classroom. I would like to think that the stories of the self that were planted in the participants in this study would have been more positive ones had they experienced classrooms such as these.

Impacts...hopes for the future

Participants

It is difficult for me to envision the impact of this work on the participants who shared their experiences with me. My intention was that participation in this work would support their ability to rethink their perceptions of themselves as students and as learners. I hoped to empower them to change the stories they live by through a rethinking of the role of students and teachers in the evaluation of student achievement.

I know that for some of them the act of telling their stories, then seeing them reflected back through the narratives I created, has caused them to reflect and rethink the story of self that they have been living. This comes out to a certain extent in the ‘student now’ narratives. Three of the participants told me that the story-sharing sessions they attended caused them to go home and pull out their old school records and to talk with their parents about them. Amber was the only one who spoke with me in any depth about new understandings that were emerging for her as we worked together and evidence of this is embedded within her narratives. For example, she made statements such as, “I think I was asking for help” or “I only did that for power” that reflect a deeper sense of self-reflection upon the details of the narratives that were emerging. I hope that

the impact of this telling and reflecting has been a positive one for all of the participants, but it is a hope based on little evidence, as for most of them our relationship ended with our discussions about the co-created narratives. It is an area I have yet to explore in more depth.

I continued to work with the Inner Student support group throughout the months following the story-sharing sessions. On one day in particular I went to an Inner Student meeting minutes after writing ‘Another Apple Story’. I was full of emotion from the writing and the moment I saw Amber’s face I was struck with the realization of what it must have felt like for her to share her difficult stories with me. I expressed this to her, and she confirmed that although it had been difficult to share the stories, she had appreciated the process and the opportunity. She has expressed an intense interest in reading the dissertation and meeting with me to talk about it. Because her stories were so painful, I am slightly apprehensive about how she will perceive my interpretations of the work, but at the same time I’m looking forward to the conversation.

When I asked each participant what they would like to see happen with these narratives, they all indicated that they would like others to hear their stories and think about them. Amber expressed a desire for me to create a forum for teachers and students to hear the stories and discuss them. I have plans underway to create such a space within Junior Alternative schools in a local school district. I have begun the process of sharing the stories and engaging in discussion around them by presenting aspects of this work in various professional venues such as academic conferences and I intend to expand to working with practicing teachers and student teachers to explore the experiences of students in classrooms through story.

Both Amber and Shawn have expressed interest in working with young people who are struggling in school and it is my hope to facilitate this connection through work with Junior and

Senior Alternate students in our local area. My vision is that we will use this work as a starting place to facilitate a process for students who are presently experiencing failure in the school system to surface their stories and build connections that will hopefully enhance their potential for success. This could be a mutually beneficial arrangement that would offer Amber and Shawn a sense of hope and meaningful purpose in the work should they choose to pursue it. It offers the possibility of an enactment of what Lather (1986) describes as ‘catalytic validity’ through increased “self-understanding and, ideally, self-determination through research participation” (p. 67).

Each of these people took a risk by telling me their stories. The risk is magnified once the stories are recorded and made more tangible through writing. Tom King (2003) reminds us that once a story is told, it cannot be called back: “Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell” (p. 8). I have to be vigilant in my respect for the risks that these stories represent and careful with the ways in which I ‘loose them’ into the world. As our relationships near their conclusion, I am left with a feeling of gratitude for the gifts each of them have given me in the form of their stories.

Teachers

My hope is that the impact of this work is that it will help practicing teachers to develop an enhanced understanding of the impacts of assessment and evaluation processes on themselves and on their students. I hope that a more critical awareness of the power dynamics embedded in classrooms will help them to engage in teaching practices that reflect this awareness. I believe that even the simple act of telling a story can help others to consider an alternative perspective. For example, as I was refining the ‘How do you spell apple’ story I asked a teaching colleague if I could observe her students while they were writing a spelling tests so that I could immerse

myself in a Grade 2 spelling test context. Her response was, “I’m sorry, we’re not doing a spelling test today, but we *are* doing a Mad Minute.⁵ You should come then, that’s when the kids are *really* stressed out!” The myriad assumptions inherent in statements such as these demand to be examined and rethought.

When I began to share my stories with colleagues, I invited them to offer feedback and critical response. On one occasion, after I finished reading the ‘How do you spell apple?’ story, I looked up from the page and saw a stricken expression on the face of a friend and colleague across the table. I asked what she was thinking and she said, “Oh my God. I do that to my students week after week after week. I’ve never thought about it that way.” Her emotional reaction to the story helped to open up a new way of thinking about practices that had been previously unquestioned. My hope is that offering the stories and interpretations of this work to those in the teaching profession would help them to recognize the perspective of their students when they make decisions about the forms of assessment and evaluation to use in their classrooms as well as providing them with an opportunity to surface and explore the tensions they experience as professionals who are continually negotiating their dual roles of ‘coach’ and ‘judge’ in classrooms.

One of the intentions of sharing autoethnographic and biographic narratives of experience is to evoke an emotional and reader-constructed response from the audience. I believe that an engagement with stories that provoke an emotional response has the potential to provoke critical thought about the experiences of the particular, and extend those thoughts to the experiences of others without engaging in accusations and blaming. My intention is to communicate this

⁵ A Mad Minute is a math drill in which students are usually given one minute to answer as many basic math facts questions as they can.

message, “This was my experience. These were the experiences of these four people. This is what they made me think about. What do they make you think about?” This will be a place from which to begin.

Self

I go back to B.Davies (2000) – to her description of the self as “precarious, contradictory, in process, constantly being reconstituted ... each time we think or speak” (p. 33). Our precarious selves are sometimes a mystery. Sometimes we can’t see our selves until we reveal them through our stories. As she says, each of us is locating and taking up as our own narratives of ourselves that knit together the details of our existence. We’re slowly figuring out what we’re becoming.

Sometimes we can’t see our selves until we reflect our images against others – against the *we* of our existence. I thought I knew myself. Until I embarked upon this process of seeking to find my earlier self and the voices of others in my narratives – those who may have populated the chapters of my narratives of self - I would have told you a different story about who I am. What I know now is that who I am is still a becoming, and I can’t predict who that *me* will be as my story continues to unfold. The *idea* that is who I am is truly, as Barone (2000) tells us, “a continually unfolding story - one that can never be fully told” (p. 123), yet I feel sure that who I become will always contain echoes of who I was, and who I am, and who I am in relation to others.

Self as teacher

As I said in the introduction, I feel that to be a teacher is to wield a frightening power. This work has only reinforced this feeling for me. So, from the perspective of one who now understands more clearly the potential impact of this work, the question is, do I continue to

teach? If so, do I continue as a teacher educator and help others to enter this challenging profession? To teach may be to wield a frightening power, but it is also an enactment that is imbued with hope for the future. I am an optimist at heart, and can't help but imagine possibilities for the future that involve seeking positive change in our education systems. My work with future teachers will always be imbued with messages about the power that teachers have and will incorporate an expectation that student teachers consider the notion of power in their assessment relationships with me, as their teacher, and with their future students.

From a personal perspective, the implications of this work are that I am much more critically aware of the power dynamics at play in classrooms and the institution of school. I am also investing much more thought and energy into the potentially positive impact of shifting power dynamics in classrooms away from traditionally hierarchical structures and toward a 'levelling' of hierarchies that can occur in classrooms that recognize and honour student voice and involve students in assessment and evaluation processes. The formative assessment 'movement' has great potential to serve these purposes and I am fully engaged in working with student teachers to help them rethink the purposes and impacts of assessment and evaluation in their future classrooms.

As a result of this work, I have become more and more uncomfortable with grading practices. I have been granted permission by my institution to teach my courses without grades, which has given me the opportunity to challenge my students' traditional notions of the role of grading in teaching and learning. It has also given me the opportunity to continually rethink my position in relation to assessment and evaluation as a teacher and to seek ways of supporting my students' learning through descriptive feedback and collaborative negotiation around the ways in which my students represent their attainment of learning goals.

I initiate a relationship with my students in teacher education by first telling them my autoethnographic stories, then facilitating discussions around the issues they raise. I then invite them to respond by sharing stories of their own. This process recognizes the potential similarities and differences between their experiences and mine and, hopefully, provokes them to think about the impact of evaluation processes on them. What this work will add to this approach is an invitation, through stories, to explore the experience of ‘not success’ in school which is foreign to many of them. I hope that through these stories they will engage in empathetic response, as I did, and reconsider their positioning in relation to successful students and those who struggle.

As I work with each teacher education student, I see beyond her the thousands of children that she will go on to influence. I want my students, and their future students, to be able to decide for themselves whether they ‘measure up’ or how they ‘measure up’ or whether they need to be measured at all to determine their value. I want to place that power in their hands. I want them to be strong poets and to create learning environments that allow strong poets to flourish.

Conclusion: You’ve heard it now

We have explored together the narratives of five people, and I have intentionally left spaces within the narratives and my interpretations for you, the reader, to consider your own responses to the dilemmas they present. The messages that these narratives bear have relevance and significance far beyond the lives of these five people. As a witness to the narratives, only you, the reader, can speak to the verisimilitude within them; if there were points of familiarity that emerged, if you connected these experiences to your own experiences, or the experiences of others you have encountered in your world and gained some insight into the meaning of those experiences for yourself and others, then some of my goals have been achieved. If you move

beyond awareness and actively question the practices that are endemic in Western school systems, then there is hope for this work to have a wider impact.

As Tom King (2003) says, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003, p. 2). Take the stories I’ve shared with you for instance. My stories. Shawn, Hannah, Andrew and Amber’s stories. As King refers to his own stories he says

Of course, you don’t have to pay attention to any of these stories....But help yourself to one if you like. ...It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now. (p. 119)

I encourage each of us to reflect upon the reality of the impacts of schooling and to imagine the possibilities that could emerge from rethinking our approach. Sir Ken Robinson (2010) suggests that we conceive of a new metaphor for schools - one that is derived from agriculture. To rethink education from an agricultural perspective, he says; let us consider the fact that farmers recognize the reality that different plants need different things to flourish. Some need more light than others. Some need a lot of water, while others need very little. Soil conditions that are ideal for one plant are deadly for others. Farmers don’t attach the leaves to the stalks or the flowers to the stems of the plants they grow, they merely create the conditions for growth. School then, and education, could be viewed as a way of creating the conditions for people to flourish. Healthy plants are healthy all over. They sustain not only themselves, but the environment around them as well (2010). As educators “our aim should be to change our cultural practices so that students and teachers look to assessment as a source of insight and help instead of an occasion for meting out rewards and punishments” (Shepard, 2000, p. 10).

If each and every student could be treated with the nurturing and respect that creates conditions for them to flourish and to thrive, then the stories that would be planted within them could be stories of possibility. Each student could be honoured for the marvel that she is, and emerge from her schooling as a strong poet – a work of art who is continually becoming.

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