School in Community, Challenges and Transformation:

A Beginning Teacher Reflects on Experiences and Collective Histories in a Rural, Southern Ontario School

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Abstract

This research account centers on the life history-inspired narratives of engaged teachers, parents, and community members associated with King Albert Public School (KAPS). Since early 2000 to 2008 staff at KAPS collaborated with students, community parents, businesses, and organizations to meet the needs of students and to make positive connections within surrounding neighbourhoods. In the process KAPS witnessed substantial transformation. Paramount in connecting with the community was the construction of a new school gymnasium. KAPS became a hub for students, parents, and community. In the process of construction and subsequent use of the gym, the school itself developed a new sense of meaning in the community. As I navigate the process of becoming a teacher I use a reflexive inquiry approach to parallel my process of development to the transformation that occurred at KAPS. Also, this project contributes to the rural and small-town Ontario research literature on poverty and schooling.
Dedication

For

Cassidy, Miranda, Aaron, Tanner, Austen, Jimmy, Matthew, Ben, Cole, Preston, Kerissa, Dylan, Noah, Michael, Logan, Brayden, Wayne, and Meadoe

~ “Because I knew you, I have been changed for good” ~

1 “For Good” from the Musical Wicked, (Music & Lyrics by Schwartz, Stephen, 2004).
Acknowledgments

With thanks to participants,

Anne, Bob, Darla, Don, Greg, Jane, Leanne, Penny, Roger, Susan,
for your work, sharing your stories and for your co-creation in this thesis.

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Introduction. “Stories of Action within Theories of Context”

I consider myself to be first and foremost a learner, and I hope that will continue throughout my life. I have been ‘becoming a teacher’ since I was six or seven years old and will likely continue to hone the practice long after I retire. Sometimes I envision my life as a journey on a waterway or canal system, learning and being challenged along the way. I navigate a series of rivers, lakes, channels, locks, dams, and swing bridges. I imagine myself standing in a river hearing the dynamic flowing water, feeling it rush and wrap around my ankles, I watch it flow by, as its direction changes when it hits my legs. I feel as planted as a small island, an islet, as it streams by me. However, sometimes, the water is deeper and up to my hips. It rushes by me and it takes everything within me to steady myself. It pulls at my body, urging me to come with it. Sometimes I feel unready to take the plunge. Other times, I give in to the current and imagine myself moving within the water, being pulled, contorting myself as we push around obstacles, like rocks or through rapids. As hard as I swim, I cannot reach the edge of the river, but must continue until the water pools or opens into a great, wide lake. While swimming I lift my head, as when I first learned to front crawl, to attempt to see where I am going.

John Paul Lederach’s (2005, p. 128) metaphor of a river influences my praxis and this reflexive inquiry. He writes about the process of a river rushing and swirling unhindered. He also writes:

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2 From Goodson (1995) p. 98
If you stand high on a mountain, and look down at the river from a long distance what you see is the shape and form it has carved in the land. From a distance it looks static. You see it as a structure not a dynamic process. This is a process-structure. A river is dynamic, adaptive and changing while at the same time carving a structure with direction and purpose.

In my life’s journey and in my process of becoming an educator, it often feels like an adaptive, dynamic, and responsive change process. At the same time, I must remain reflexive in this process which directs its purpose and provides the framework to support the flow. To understand where I am, I must consider where I began this journey of becoming an educator.

Since childhood I have wanted to be an elementary school teacher. From an early age younger children were drawn to me. My family members suggested I, like two of my aunts, become a teacher.

As a teenager, I attempted to establish myself as an educator through leadership roles, and through caring for children, camp counselling, teaching Sunday School, volunteering in a classroom, and tutoring groups of children and individuals. For me, this career path seemed ideal. I loved being with kids. I loved witnessing or being a part of the transition from not being able to write their names or tie their shoes, to accomplishing these tasks. I loved learning through music, drama and crafts, and sharing my passions with others. I was never an A+ student, but built solid learning strategies which I felt I could share as a classroom teacher.

When I finished high school I sought universities that offered strong teaching focal points, in addition to research and an excellent academic faculties. I choose Trent University. During my four years there I became
aware of, engaged in, and passionate about many social justice, environmental, community, and international development issues. I thought about how I wished I had known much of this information in high school and I wondered why I did not. I thrived in Trent’s focused, seminar-style pedagogies. I began believing in my abilities as an academic. I dreamed about engaging high school students in informed conversations instead of being the teacher directing from the front of the room. During my fourth year the relevancy of theory, research, and practice became real to me.

At Trent University, there were multiple layers of my consciousness raising, unlearning, learning, and relearning especially around issues of race, class, and gender. It was at Trent that channels of new knowledge emerged and I developed a critical awareness of the world around me and my place in it. Discussing theories and perspectives with my peers in class and contextualizing these by hearing stories from a large, diverse population of international and domestic students with varying socio-economic backgrounds reshaped my understanding and view of the world. I also choose the Trent Bachelor of Education program because of what I had learned in my undergraduate degree at Trent. I had begun a journey of examining oppressions that I had previously accepted and internalized. I believed the Trent Education program would have like-minded people and foster this development as a part of our teaching practice. I expected the same type of engaged learning from multiple backgrounds and multiple ways of knowing. I accepted a position in the Intermediate/Senior cohort — with teachables in History and Dramatic Arts. I
was passionate about being able to express current social and political issues through understanding their context, then expressing them in a creative way. Throughout that year I was disappointed to find many of my peers did not believe in the power of education to confront issues. They saw teaching as a place where their knowledge was to transferred to students. Some of the teacher educators in the program worked to shift this balance but, after our first placements, many teacher candidates returned jaded by the system.³

Optimistic, but more aware of the limits of the education system in Ontario, I began my first year as a professional, certified teacher at King Albert Public School. My learning continued. This time it was not about issues of classroom teaching, curriculum, creating a positive learning environment or child development. This time it was about poverty, food, family, community, collaboration, and challenges of becoming a full-time school teacher.⁴

In this research account I parallel the transformation which occurred at King Albert Public School between early 2000 to 2007, with my process of becoming an educator. Through a narrative account of the first day that the gymnasium opened to staff and students I look back at the beginning of the transformation of the school into a hub for the community which this school

³ Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1983) detail the unique contributions of experiential learning across the learning to teach continuum by identifying three pitfalls that halt learning and delude prospective teachers into believing that, “the central aspects of teaching have been mastered and understood…The ‘familiarity pitfall’ arises from the fact that prospective teachers are no strangers to classrooms. The ‘two-worlds pitfall’ arises from the fact that teacher education goes on in two distinct settings and from the fallacious assumption that making connections between these two worlds is straightforward and can be left to the novice. The third pitfall arises from the fact that classrooms are not set up for teaching teachers. It’s a case of being at ‘cross purposes,” (pp. 4, 20).

⁴ Ronald Morrish describes the importance of teamwork in a school. “Teachers need to see themselves as school teachers, not just classroom teachers. All staff members must make a commitment to teamwork…” (The Montreal Teachers Association Website, n.d.).
continues to work towards today. To understand the impact of the gymnasium on the school I consider where and when it began.

The research account contains two fonts to delinate between the narrative of the day the gym opened at King Albert Public School and the narratives which contextualize the importance of the construction of a gymnasium at the school. My narratives of the day the gym opened will be written using Century Gothic size 12 font. This is the narrative arc which illustrates many points. I bring context to why the building of the gym was so transformative. The contextual information flows through the narrative arc using Times New Roman size 12 font. The contextual stories begin with my own, then branch out to other staff and parents at the school. The community stories emerge after the gym opens, in the same way that the community involvement grew with the presence of the gym. Cole and Knowles (2001 p. 122) write, “In life history research…, as in other forms of qualitative research where researchers have a particular commitment to pushing the boundaries of form and audience – we view representational form as central to the achievement of research goals…. In other words, the form, itself, has power to inform.”

The interview conversations took place in homes, offices, classrooms and gardens. The transcribed interview conversations are presented in a storied format to create this fact-ion, the melding of both fact and fiction, to create the story.
I use footnotes to make connections between the narrative and academic literature. I use footnotes to blend aspects of the participants pratical knowing with ideas expressed by other theorists and researchers. I use footnotes to expand upon thoughts and provide additional details, but so as not to take away from the story.

The story of King Albert Public School is told by the voices of those who have seen the changes. This account comes from listening to their stories and documenting them. It comes from wanting research to be something that resounds with my soul. This inquiry story is my reflexive nature working to understand better the role of ‘the teacher’ in schools with challenging circumstances. Because teachers do not teach in isolation, parents and community groups are included in the story. My desire is that the story I have created can be taken back to the community. I want it to say both to ourselves and to others, “We were here and this is our story.”

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5 Arts-informed research draws the reader or viewer in and it creates a space for dialogue due to its accessible language (Cole and Knowles, 2008).
Chapter 1. The Gym

9:00 am

Students bounce and buzz as 18 seven year olds burst into our classroom and scramble their seats. Madeline, one of the more reserved students, floats into the room and presents me with a bouquet of colourful leaves. “I picked these especially for you Mizz Nicholls,” she whispers, tucking a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear.

“They are just lovely, thank you so much Madeline, I will keep them here on my desk,” I say, as I set them delicately into a short glass on my wooden desk made of oak.

“Good Morning boys and girls. Please stand for the singing of ‘O Canada,’” Mrs. Avery’s voice booms over the loud speaker.

My Grade Two class at King Albert Public School\(^6\) jumps up to sing and sign the national anthem.

“Please be seated,” says Mrs. Avery. “Today is a very special day at King Albert. Today, after three years of waiting, we will celebrate the opening of OUR NEW GYM!”

\(^6\) King Albert Public School is also known as KAPS but most often referred to as King Albert.
Uproarious cheers and squeals join the clamour from other classrooms throughout the school.

King Albert Public School, built in 1912, never had a gymnasium. In 2004, as one of the province’s last elementary schools without one, Mrs. Avery and the School Council members banded together to lobby the school board. A group of parents, who in the past had shied away from joining the parent council, now discovered a reason to come together and a project to focus on.

Once school board trustee, Rick Johnston, joined the group, the slow campaign began. King Albert parents wrote letters, called, and attended the school board meetings to place emphasis on the topic. They eventually brought in the local media. Collaboration and connection between the parent group and Mrs. Avery strengthened. Jane Avery brought parents to decision-making meetings with the gym architect where the connection solidified. Over twenty parents, who would not have crossed the threshold of the school entry way,7

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7 Teachers noted in our conversations that parents who had never been involved before became engaged. Parents acknowledged various rationale from distrust, to lack of interest, to inability because of time or physical constraints, to not knowing how to become involved as reasons they had not participated in the past.
were organized: advocating, raising funds, and bringing coffee to the construction site workers.\(^8\)

I quieted my students’ cheers. “Listen to Mrs. Avery.”

Mrs. Avery continued, “Teachers please wait; classes will be called down one at a time. And parents or guests that are already in the building, if you have not already done so, please be sure to sign-in at the office. Have a good day.” The PA clicked off.

“Good Morning Grade Twos! I’m glad you’re here this morning. I feel the excitement in the room. Tell me: Why are you excited to have a new gym? What kinds of activities will you do in the gym?” Hands shot into the air.

“Sports!”

“Plays!”

“Assemblies!”

As the students shared, I wrote their responses on the board. I circled ‘sports’ to create the centre of the web for a

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\(^8\) Joyce Epstein (2001, pp. 43-44) argues that there are six types of parent involvement: Type 1 — Parenting; Type 2 — Communicating; Type 3 — Volunteering; Type 4 — Learning at Home; Type 5 — Decision Making, which includes, “families participating in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities thorough PTA, committees, councils, and other parent organization;” Type 6 — Collaborating with the Community, which includes, “collaborating with the community business, agencies, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.” At King Albert, parents moved from low levels of involvement through communication, volunteering, learning at home, and no involvement through decision making to active levels of engagement in all six defined areas.
brainstorming activity – anything to stall until we are called down.

“Okay. Thank you. Now, can you name sports that you hope to play in the gym?”

Up until this point, King Albert used a double portable in lieu of a proper gym space. The students could not play some games, like volleyball and basketball, because of height and space limitations. Staff found alternatives, like walking to the local Boys and Girls Club to use their facility, and renting nearby church halls for Christmas plays. The parents felt the school’s double portable and the time spent walking to the other facilities was no longer sufficient. One father shared, “We’re not a big school, but, you know, why not help our children? Because, if our children can’t learn sports properly, then they’re going to lose out on all the other opportunities that other children have and they have to compete against those children.” Many of the students at King Albert have limited formal or outside experience with sports; it is often at school that they have their first experience being on a team.

Inquiry

In September of 2007 I began my first teaching position and spent the first four months of my professional career at King Albert Public School. The
experience was exciting and beautiful, full of laughter and full of tears, of hope and of pain. There were children in the school who changed my mind as to the purpose of education. There were experiences with the community, both within the building and within the neighbourhood, that shaped my teacher identity, the lens through which I see the world, and my place in it. King Albert Public School played a pivotal role in my development as an educator. I wanted to study my experience at King Albert Public School. I recollect J. Gary Knowles telling me that, “we tend to research what it is that we need to know” (2008, personal communication).

In September of 2008 I began a Master’s degree program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The purpose of my KAPS inquiry arose from my need to be reflexive about my whirlwind experience there, both personally and professionally; and to document what I believe to be an extraordinary transformation of King Albert that occurred in the last ten years since 2000.

The purpose of this qualitative research project, drawing on principles and practices of life history research, is to discover the human experience and social context at King Albert Public School. I hope to more fully understand the transformation that occurred both within the school and in the community over the last few years. Irene E. K. Karpiak (2008, p. 81) says that, “Through the acts of telling our stories, writing our stories, and reading others’ stories, we become known both to others and to ourselves.”
Why Narrative?

I remember being read to from a very early age. When we were young, my sisters and I loved getting ready for bed with our matching nighties and snuggling in my parents’ bed while Mum read the *Chronicles of Narnia* or *Anne of Green Gables*. To me, these were stories about connection with my family, with other points in history, with fantasy, with dreams. They also instilled within me the importance of reading others’ stories.

I remember placing the last of the Christmas decorations on the tree with my mother, after my sisters had tired of the activity and were watching Christmas specials with Dad. I asked her if there really was a Santa Claus. She took me upstairs to her bedroom and pulled a book out of the back of her closet – *Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus*. For me, there were stories to learn from and stories to get through challenging times. It showed me that by reading others’ stories, I may see myself and my experience in another’s story.

I remember attending countless Scottish Highland Games across Ontario with my family to watch my sisters compete in Highland Dancing, to see the caber toss and to walk the Aisle of Clans, to be regaled by the tales of the Scottish pride, hospitality, frugality and spirit, to hear tales of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Auld Alliance. For me, these stories embodied what my Grade Seven history teacher, Mr. Smith, used to ask, “How will you know where you are going if you don’t know where you’ve been?” These are stories of my history.

10 “People look back for various reasons, but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. I am more than what the thin present defines,” (Tuan, 1977, p. 186).
Growing up in a close-knit family I remember birthdays, Christmases, Easters and summer holidays filled with stories, laughter, wisdom, tears, and my grandmother’s sayings quoted from verses from popular songs, the Bible, or great literary writers:

He who steals my purse steals trash, ’tis mine, ‘tis his and has been slave to many. But he who filches from me my good name, taketh from me that which enriches him not but makes me poor indeed.\textsuperscript{11}

This foundation filled me with a sense of who I was in the world. My grandmother’s sayings and shared stories taught me the importance of taking pride in my heritage and the necessity of a good reputation, which takes time to build but can be destroyed away in moments. To me, these stories were grounding, like a tree growing tall held firm by deep roots.

I remember being increasingly drawn into the stories of seemingly ordinary people. By the fourth year of my undergraduate degree, I immersed myself within social and local history to complete an independent research project on my grandmother, Ethelreda Morrison. For me, this project was about intentionality and contributions. When I started it, I knew that time with my grandmother was short; part of this project connected to my personal passion to preserve her stories, her memories, her voice, her facial expressions, her smiles. My research contextualized her life with the existing literature and local archival data regarding rural farming, nursing, and religious influences on communities. I spent hours pouring over texts and footage of interviews of my grandmother, examining personal artefacts, like her journals and photographs,

\textsuperscript{11} Shakespeare’s Othello Act III Scene 3
and searching in local archives. I interwove the information into a documentary film, the alternative media form most appropriate for communicating the research story (Nicholls, 2006).

Asking questions, recording, and telling stories became an opportunity for me to better understand the world and my place in it and my own identity. Volunteering at an orphanage in Ecuador after completing undergraduate studies furthered this understanding. I found teaching the students English challenging, especially with access to limited resources. I sat with each child and transcribed their told stories of loss, of present joy, and of future hopes. I devised this strategy, because I secretly desired to place equal emphasis on the importance of their Ecuadorian identities, as much as their new identities in the American-run orphanage. For them, it was their stories written down, something they could keep — a way to remember. For me, it was a way to understand each child and have something to remember them by. Years later, I now realize the impact these stories had on me, the way I choose to live my life, and the path that I must take.

Later, while working on course work for my Masters’ degree, I read the Massey Lecture series, *The Truth about Stories*, in which Thomas King (2003 p. 153) quotes Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri, “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 meaningless. If we change the stories we live by, quite
possibly we change our lives.” Now that I have seen and heard the stories surrounding King Albert, I am responsible to continue to tell the stories.

**Why Life History?**

Life history research feels natural to me as I have demonstrated life history research with an arts-informed perspective for many years without using the language. My past research projects were grounded in personal experience, but I lacked the philosophical framework to locate those research practices. What drew me to life history research were the guiding principles, as defined by Cole and Knowles (2001): relationality, mutuality, empathy, as well as care, sensitivity, and respect.

These resonate with my initial instincts and the type of researcher, or inquirer, I strive to be. The reason I decided to utilize the principles and practices of life history research is relationality; the relationship between researcher and participants, the relationship between researcher and the focus of the study, and the relationship between participants’ lives and the contexts within which they are situated.

I do not live in a vacuum. Nor do I teach in one. Students’ lives, my interactions with them, and my own life are dependent on contexts of experience. My research inquiry seeks to honour the participants and the transformation that has occurred at King Albert Public School and considers the profound influences of, “social, economic, historical, religious, and educational circumstances…lives shaped by influences of family and culture; by existence within communities and within natural and cultural landscapes; by personal
beliefs and independent actions” (Cole and Knowles, 2001, p. 3). In other words, the purpose of this project is to gain insights into the stories that surround King Albert Public School so that I might understand the, “relationships, the complex interactions, between life and context, self and place. It is about comprehending the complexities of a person's day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out…so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved,” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).

I developed an account as told by the key stakeholders within the King Albert Public School community during the early 2000 until 2007: parents, teachers, community business owners, principals, educational assistants and community organizations. I changed the names of all of the students and others who wished to remain anonymous. In order avoid easy identification, I altered some details because of the nature of the research, and to create safety within a small community. In some cases I, as narrator, speak these stories to protect their identities. Many of my participants graciously allowed me to honour their work by including their real names.

Kohli (1981, p. 65) writes that, “life histories are…not a collection of all the events…but rather ‘structural self images.’” The stories remembered and told by the members of the King Albert Public School community reveal aspects of the school’s culture and identity, how the school is viewed by the members, and how they want others to see it.
This research project demanded I give in to the river. I began with a life history research project; I waded in until the water encircled my hips — participating, observing, researching. As I delved deeper into this research work, the current pulled me in a different direction — to reflexively consider my process of becoming an educator and pushed me to understand the impact King Albert had on that process with all the parts of my life rushing around me. I have let the methodology direct the course of this research project.

**Why Reflexive Inquiry?**

Through my experience and during my studies, I have come to think of teaching as inquiry, that teaching itself is an act of researching. Teaching is not simply applying a tool kit of disembodied strategies, principles, or theories that lack context. I believe that teaching is complex. It is a deeply personal expression of knowledge and learning. Cole and Knowles (2000, p. 1) write, “we see theory as embedded in, not applied to, practice, and we see teachers as knowledge holders and developers, not just knowledge users.” Connelly and Clandinin coined the term ‘personal practical knowledge’:

…Designed as a term to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher’s past experiences, in the teacher’s present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions…. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 25).

My teacher training program emphasized the importance of reflective inquiry and journaling, referring to the process of examining and refining our professional practices. Reflexive inquiry, as defined by Cole and Knowles
(2000, p. 2), “on the other hand, is reflective inquiry situated within the context of personal histories in order to make connections between personal lives and professional careers, and to understand personal (including early) influences on professional practice.” Reflexive inquiry is rooted in a critical perspective. We all understand the world based on our experiences; without knowing these develop the lens through which we see. Our lens or perspectives are based on people, places, and things we have encountered. This serves as a foundation for new experiences. I believe it is essential for me to understand the experiences which have informed my perspective in order to be prepared, experience new things and potentially shift my lens around knowledge, beliefs, and societal structures (Nicholls, 2010 p. 151). This reflexive inquiry approach is characterized by an interrogation of status quo norms and practices, especially with respect to issues of power and control (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Paulo Freire would call this process of consciousness raising, conscientization. By studying my process of becoming a teacher and my professional practice, I provoke ongoing improvement of both my teaching and learning.

Early in my research study Gary Knowles said to me when discussing the topic of this thesis, “All research is autobiographical and that it reflects who we are” (2008, personal communication). I did not realize how autobiographical the work would become and how impactful it would be on my development as an educator. I have continued to learn to teach and teach to learn.
The Context

The Canadian flag waves outside of King Albert Public School situated two blocks south of City Hall, in the town of Lindsay, Ontario.\textsuperscript{12} It serves as the central school for those living in the downtown area. The school stands west of the Scugog River, which carves its way through town, south of the main street’s shops and restaurants in this mid-sized town which is the heart for business and commerce in a cottage and lakes region of Southern Ontario.

On the first floor of the building the shiny hardwood floorboards lead to the office, and four classrooms, including the French room. Grand platform staircases frame the ends of the building and lead to four more classrooms on the second floor for the Grade Three through to Grade Six students and two resource rooms. The basement houses the computer lab, staff room, Breakfast Club room, student washrooms, and the library. Throughout the school, colourful bulletin boards cover the walls, overflowing with student work and achievements, information about healthy eating, fundraising programs, and KAPS’s history. A student designed and painted outdoor mural lines the walls of the west staircase while large framed photographs of students reading, working, and playing line the east stairwell.

My initial impressions of King Albert Public School was although it is struggles with declining enrolment the school is used to full capacity; alive with before-, during-, and after-school programming. King Albert staff find engaging parents and students in relevant authentic ways quite challenging. In

\textsuperscript{12} According to Canadian Census Data from 2006, Lindsay’s population was approximately 20,000. Lindsay has been part of the amalgamated City of Kawartha Lakes since its creation in 2000.
standardized Provincial achievement assessments King Albert students’ marks fall below the provincial standards. However, there has been an increase in scores over the last four years. Using innovative, creative, Differentiated Instruction strategies is essential for King Albert staff to facilitate inclusive classrooms as 40.3 percent of the student population receive special education services. Over the last decade, staff collaborated with parents and the community to focus on meeting the needs of the whole child. This has brought about transformation in teaching practices, shifted perceptions of the school both from within and outside of the building, and increased parental engagement.

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13 Joseph Flessa (2007, p. 2) writes in a review of the literature surrounding poverty and education that, “The main question in the literature is not whether there are differences in educational outcomes according to a student’s family income or socioeconomic status (SES). It is not, in other words, a surprise to learn that all traditional measures of school success systematically rank students from poor families lower than their wealthier peers.” While it is challenging to correlate the gradual improvement in EQAO results to the increased parental engagement and the community supports that began meeting the needs of the students, teachers at King Albert anecdotally place partial credit on the improvement to the community developed within the school.

Research which includes multiple ways of defining success include “indicators to issues of school culture (see Firestone & Louis, 1999; Mintrop, 2008; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007) and to the nature of relationships and shared meanings and practices (Fullan, 2007) within the school – between teachers, between staff and students, between teachers and school leader (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) and beyond the school into children’s families and communities (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hands, 2008; Riley, 2008, R.A. Malatest & Co., 2002)” (Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010).

14 The student population fluctuates between 160 to 200. Over forty percent access special education services as compared to 13.1 percent provincially (Ontario Ministry of Education website, 2010).

15 Both the principals and teachers acknowledged this during our conversations. While teaching at King Albert, I observed and learned from their examples. Teachers began teaching outside of the four walls of their classrooms, they collaborated on lesson plans, and they shared best practices. One teacher noted that conversations among staff shifted from discussions of student poor behavior choices, to positive and professional based topics.
9:07am

I place my left hand on the cool, black chalkboard, to stabilize my right, as I write the ideas of the Grade Twos student. I focus on printing the letters precisely and in a straight line. The bulletins and chalkboards are hung low, about 60 centimetres or two feet from the floor, at eye level for children seven years of age. I turn around to face the class and my eyes circle the room, glancing at the bulletin boards full of charts, student work, number lines, alphabet charts, maps, and a word wall. The old saying, ‘If these walls could talk,’ comes to mind. What would these walls tell us?

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I sat down with Roger Hill, a local business owner, who attended King Albert Public School from 1957 to 1962 and whose children also attended in the 1990s and early 2000s.

“I [lived] in a white Protestant enclave, within a [larger] Catholic neighbourhood.”

“How did that dynamic play out?” I asked.

“You had to be careful which way you walked home from school every day. And, you certainly knew you were Protestant and there was no question at all, living in the south end of town — because it was close to St. Mary’s Church. Roy Neville, that was the Principal. Straight shooter. He had a pencil thin moustache, and it was trimmed absolutely perfect, and he carried his stick,
his little wooden pointer, under his arm like a Major, because actually I think he was. He had been in the army. There was certainly a military bearing about him. Yeah, Roy Neville. Good man. He ruled the school yard. And the strap was in full view of all the students at all times.

“I spent most of my formative years growing up there and public school was very regimented, both at the Principal and teacher level. Discipline was of the utmost importance. I remember old Mrs. Mann, dressed in black with inkwells on the desk; and me sticking Nancy Cunningham’s golden locks into the inkwell — and paying a very dear price for it too. As it turned out, I’m a left-handed person and I was taught to write right-handed, because that’s what teachers did. There was no question. There was no room in the school for lefties. You were taught to write right handed. That was school. We were all in the same boat.

“My fondest memory of King Albert school was the outdoor rink. Mr. Allen, who was the custodian, put the boards up every fall. We learned to skate and play hockey in the backyard. And it was the most wonderful thing about school. I waited for every recess just to get out there, get your skates on, and play. And after-school hours were spent on those rinks too. There was hockey time and there was free skate time. The rink was absolutely the finest. I can still see Mr. Allen at night flooding the rink, and it was wonderful. Probably for insurance purposes they canned the rink because everybody had bloody noses and got hurt. I can still remember guys out there getting a stick in the face. They would get cut or they would lose a tooth or get a bloody nose. But
that was just part of growing up. We never considered that an issue. Those are
my fond memories.

“And the smell of the hardwood floors coming back in the fall — every
year. I remember the wall, the west wall for boys throwing baseballs. Those
were the good times.

“Walking home, you got kids coming from St. Mary’s and they’d be
going west on Glenelg Street and you’d be going east on it. So there was
always conflict — usually around the crossing guard.

“It was funny, we weren’t rural, and we weren’t city either. We were
small town Ontario. It was changing times too, changing economic times. The
railroad was starting to disappear. Trucks were coming in. I went to school
back in the time when we had one police officer in town. That was it. But
there were about four CN officers16 and we lived in fear of them. We would
always cut through the back of the old CN station, jump the tracks on our way
home. And if the CN police ever caught you…” he shook his head and his eyes
grew.

“…Big trouble?” I confirmed.

“Yeah. I remember one thing about kindergarten that I must add. There
was a cake that was made of plywood and every time someone had a birthday,
they’d drag out this plywood cake and I think it always had five candles on it
because that’s how old you’d be. The cake would come out and you’d pretend
to light the wooden candles. They sang you ‘Happy Birthday,’ then back it

16 Canadian National Railway Police Officers
went again until somebody else had a birthday. It was painted blue with pink trim. Plywood cake. Only at King Albert.”

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The funny and unique traditions are what makes the school King Albert. Stories, histories, and memories passed along to the next generation as Roger’s three children graduated from King Albert Public School. Susan, a current teacher at the school who has become somewhat of an school archivist — collecting photographs, old ledgers, report cards, attendance books, school clothing spoke to me about the dynamic of the school shifting over the last three decades. “So the original area that fed this school was all of Kent Street — all the old Victorian houses, all the big families. If you had money you lived on Kent Street, or just off of it in the Melbourne area. This was the high end area of town because, basically, the rest was all farmers’ fields, and the East Ward was the industrial area. All of the affluent kids came here. You can look at the old pictures, and they are all wearing their little button up dresses, their saddle shoes and they are all curly haired, cute as the dickens.

“The high era for this school was in the 1950s and 1960s, and into the early 1970s. The town started to commercialize Kent Street in the late 1970s, early 1980s, and since then almost all the dwellings have become businesses, basically. To my knowledge, of the big homes on Kent Street, I believe there are only four that are actually single family dwellings. The rest in those thirty years turned into business.”
She also shared with me, “My father thinks the fact that I’m teaching at this school is quite funny; my great great aunt and my great aunt taught at this school, my uncle and aunt and my father went to this school, my cousins went to this school, and now I’m teaching here. We have four generations of people being a part of this school.”

Talking to people about how the school shifted helped me to appreciate the journey the school community had travelled, and how challenging it would be for educators to consider continually the needs of their student population. As professionals we need to be reflexive about our approaches and strategies to ensure we meet the needs of each new group of students that enters the door of the school. By describing how the catchment area of the school shifted in socio-economic and cultural ways, Susan solidified how we, as teachers, must continually develop our practice.
Chapter 2. The Office

9:12 am

King Albert Public School is a special place. I feel blessed to have this as my first teaching experience because of the support and mentoring I received as a new teacher. With today being the first day the students will see the gym, I think back to my first day and my first weeks here.

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It is August 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2007. I drive to King Albert Public School where I have my first job as a teacher. Today I will see my new classroom, meet the staff, and plan lessons. A grin stretches across my face but I also feel panic. I was hired the week before school begins to cover a teacher’s medical leave. I have three days to plan integrated, interesting, inspiring, and influential lessons.

From my house in Peterborough I take quiet side streets and back roads to slip out of town quickly. Highway Seven is full of commuters heading along this stretch of the Trans-Canada highway, rolling fields stretch out green and gold and brown. I pass through many hamlets and small communities marked by a general store, church, and school. I know the routes well between Peterborough, where I attended university, and Lindsay, my hometown. And I return again, this time to begin my career as a teacher. When I reach the Lindsay city limits I turn off the highway and roll down the window. I cruise
past the golf course, past the cemetery, and past my parents’ house and I think about learning to ride my bike, and the before-school rush of three teenage sisters. I grew up in this town. This morning feels familiar and not, at the same time.

I drive over the Scugog River, past my family’s insurance brokers’ office, past the stream of cars trickling by the Tim Hortons’ Drive-Thru window, and past the Durham Café brimming with customers. As I near the school, I notice spray painted graffiti marks on a paint-chipped fence, run-down apartments in houses, and closed shops. Within Lindsay, King Albert Public School is rumoured to be a rough, inner city-like school. Parents who are disengaged. Children’s Aid Society is highly involved. Tough kids. Tough parents. Tough for teachers who quickly rotate in and out.

I pull into the parking lot at the east side of the school and turn off my car engine. I wait. I take a last sip of coffee, grab my bag, and walk to the front of the historic, ninety-seven year-old building which faces Glenelg Street. I climb the front, centre stairs of the grand, two story red brick building with large windows. I pull open the newer, large, green crash-door. Inside, the

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17 Though King Albert Public School is not an inner-city school, often urban language is used because of a lack of relevant small town or rural Ontario research on schools in challenging circumstances. “Most of the North American literature on poverty and schooling describes U.S.A. schools. International studies draw attention to significant differences between jurisdictions in terms of educational achievement, child well-being, and policy context…” (Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010, p. 5).

Although Canada compares favourably with other advanced Western nations in terms of educational equality… the distribution of educational achievement in Canada has historically been subject to structural asymmetries related to socio-economic background, gender, and geography… In Canada, education is a provincial (and territorial) jurisdiction and, although the federal government provides a form of fiscal equalization to ensure relatively equal quality of education at the post-secondary and vocational levels, it does not do so at the K-12 level (Edgerton, Peter, & Robert, 2008, p. 862).
smell of fresh paint and sharpened pencils fills my nose. I ascend a few steps and face a large sign:

VISITORS MUST
SIGN IN AT THE OFFICE

In the Office I meet the Secretary and warden of the building, Mrs. Myers. I ask for Mrs. Avery, the Principal. Mrs. Myers steps back to let me pass. Behind her desk is a small room with filing cabinets and a round table with four chairs. Through this room, I find the principal in her office. Jane Avery, a petite woman, wears a grey suit with a funky vintage flair, chunky red glasses, and heels. Behind her L-shaped desk stands a tall bookshelf packed with binders of resources, weathered Ministry of Education documents, and tabbed handbooks. In front of the desk, two straight backed wooden chairs and, under the windows, built-in bookcases stuffed invitingly with classic and contemporary children’s books. The windows look on to the small, flat playground, mostly paved, marked with King’s Corner, hopscotch and around the world games. On the hopscotch court the Custodian collects a broken beer bottle and cigarette butts.

Mrs. Avery greets me with a smile and says, “Hello Rachael! How are you?”

“Excited. Nervous. Ready for the challenge!”

“Great. The staff meeting is in an hour. I’m just typing up the agenda. I’ll show you to your classroom.”
The hardwood floors talk back to her as she shows me where the washrooms are, points out the Grade One classroom, and the Music room on one side of the Office, and the Kindergarten room and the Grade Two room on the other. The end of summer morning sunlight fills the high ceilings in the Grade Two room. The desks, in pods of four, allow space for two computers, a round table, a reading centre, a sink, and a carpeted area for modelled and shared learning. The sun dances on the 20 small desks fitted with 20 small brightly coloured chairs, the perfect size for 20 seven-year-olds.

“Here is your class list and…here are your student profiles and last year’s IEPs. Eight of your students have been identified,” Jane smiles encouragingly.

“Thanks.”

“See you in an hour in the library.”

Outside, I hear the pounding of the jackhammer and the loud commands and the chatter of the construction people as they work on the new gymnasium. I sit at my new desk and breathe deeply.

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Our first week together seems to fly by. We learn and laugh and get to know each other through play, stories, and individual meetings. I love the

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18 An Individual Education Plan is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course, and/or any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).
students, most are kind to each other, and we laugh often. But there are times in the afternoon where I feel like the room spins around me.\textsuperscript{19}

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On Friday of the second week, Andy, usually bouncy and cheery little boy was quietly disruptive and off-task all day. I wondered what is wrong with this kid who usually sits at the front and answers all my questions. At the end of the day, he shuffled around the room.

“Andrew, let’s go. The bell has rung. Get your things on and your bag packed up.” He ignores me and plays in the corner with a truck.

“Andrew, I’m going to count to ten. When I am finished I would like you to have your bag packed and your outdoor shoes on. One, two, and three….”

I hand him his shoes. He drops them on the floor.

“…Four, five…” I sigh, frustrated. The classroom helper packs up his bag and cleans up his desk.

\textsuperscript{19} Clandinin and Connelly (1995, p. 32) wrote that teachers tell three kinds of stories: sacred stories, cover stories, and secret stories. Sacred stories are, “elusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told, because they lie too deep in the consciousness of the people.” Teachers tell cover stories outside the classroom in order to prove their competence and hide any uncertainties. Secret stories are the stories teachers live out in the safety of their classroom. They are only told to others in safe places where teachers do not feel they have to defend themselves. Thus, the importance of what Cole and Knowles call relationality within research. In order for teachers to feel safe to tell their stories, they must feel confidence and trust in the person recording their stories. In this thesis, I attempt to tell both my cover and my secret stories. While teaching, I did not always ‘get it right’. I reflexively consider how I could have handled a situation better. In writing my secret stories, I hope to unearth some of their essence in order to learn and grow from them.
“…Six, seven…” He ignores me, throws some of his work on to the floor with clenches fists, and stomps away. I stop after seven. This strategy is not helping.

Suddenly he turns, throws his hands in the air, and screams, “Why don’t YOU JUST GO AWAY! GO AWAY!” and then sobs, crumples, and sinks to the floor.

I kneel down beside the seven year-old, “Andy, buddy, what’s going on?”

“Mizz Nicholls…I…I…don’t want to go home....”

“Why don’t you want to go home, Andy?”

He tugs at the collar of his shirt and yanks out a key tied on a black shoelace, dangling from his neck. “I don’t want to go ’cause…’cause….“ He wipes away the flow of tears on his sleeve, looks away and says, “Mum gave me the key ‘cause she is going to Bingo tonight and she isn’t gonna be home ‘til late.”

“Oh. It’s going to be okay Andy. Let’s go down to the office,” I say gently. He remains on the floor. He turns his head ever so slightly and his eyes meet mine. “I saw a book in Mrs. Avery’s office on a special shelf that you will like.” He wipes his eyes quickly and nods. He takes my hand and I think *she and I will work together to figure out what to do next.*

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Two and a half hours later, my stomach rumbles and I tear open a granola bar stored in the bottom drawer of my desk. I glance up. Six o’clock.
No wonder. I shut down my computer, pack my bag, and close the door as I leave the room.

As I walk past the Office, I notice the glow of the lights, “Jane, are you here?”

“Umhum. What are you still doing here?” We both smile.

“Oh just trying to get on top of a few things...I’m...,” I trail off. “I feel like I’m in over my head.” My throat feels dry and I attempt not to let the tears that have filled my eyes slip out and stream down my cheeks.

Jane nods, “King Albert isn’t an easy place to work. When I started here in February of 2002 my first impression, and my impression for several weeks, was that I was sitting on top of a volcano about to erupt. It felt like there was a steady undercurrent of noise, confusion, a total lack of stability. My first day when I walked in at 11 o’clock, as requested by the previous administration, there had been a morning farewell assembly, and then they were doing a clap out. It was just an absolutely crazy environment. Debbie Myers, the secretary, turned to me and said, ‘Now you’re in charge!’ Everybody was on the ceiling.” Her eyes grow as she tells the story and she uses her arms to emphasize.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaim.

“So I went into the office and rang the bell, because that is a signal that we are going back to learn, and I went on the PA system and said, ‘This is your new principal. Teachers and students return to your classes.’ My first message to the school body! Not exactly the first impression I was hoping to make.
“So the next time the bell rang it was time for the kids to have lunch. They had twenty minutes to eat, and then there was forty minutes outside! So because it was February, the snow was pushed back into tall piles and the kids were sliding down the snow banks. And I remember there was this kid, Ryan, a big, big kid for Grade Four; he wore a blue and yellow snowsuit and he was in charge of the hill. And he was pushing and shoving and pounding the living crap out of the other kids. And everybody was fighting. And there was no separation of little kids from big kids. I came from a rural school with a huge playground. This was a very tiny playground compared to what I had had and I just watched flabbergasted!

“How many teachers were on duty?”

“Two teachers on duty and they stood in the corner talking to one another, while the other kids just pummelled one another. And I thought, ‘Oh my God! What am I going to do with this?’ So I went out and first tried to handle Ryan. And he wasn’t quite used to being told what to do. So I had him go and stand against the wall but that didn’t really work. So I had the two teachers who were on duty help me escort him into the building. He sat in the office quite shocked that this could happen to him.

“The first week that I was there, I created the School Incident Report.20 I developed the Think Paper along the way too.21 So they knew that they were going to have to write and we just kept sharpening pencils.

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20 The School Incident Report is written by the teacher present on the yard when a student is sent to the office. The report indicts what the nature of the incident was that happened on the school yard. Consistency, documentation, and follow up were vitally important to Jane’s approach to school routines. See Appendix A.
“At the end of the day, the halls would fill with parents that smelled of alcohol and cigarettes and pot. It was absolute chaos at the end of the day. I knew I had to get this stopped.

“My goal had always been to make parents feel like they are welcome in the school, but not under those conditions. It is tough to balance. So, the first thing I did was call the staff together in the second week. ‘We have to stop having parents in the hall,’ and they were all in agreement. Many of the teachers had been attacked by a parent or almost lost a kid to the wrong parent, as there are all kinds of custody issues here. We started standing at our doors and clearing out the halls and a notice went home to ‘Please wait outside the school.’ This was met with some resistance. There were parents who said, ‘I’m not going to follow that rule! That’s your rule.’

“That first two weeks, between discipline problems and getting parents on board and in line…somehow I didn’t notice there was a bathroom in the office. I was going downstairs to the library, where I knew there was a bathroom. Coming back into the office one day, around lunchtime and I noticed a little girl trying to reach the sink to wash her hands. So I lifted her up to wash her hands and looked around me, ‘This is a bathroom! In my office!’ I had been running in and out of that office. That’s the indication of how busy I was the first two weeks.”

“When I came back after March break, I decided I needed to be more of myself. I had not been myself, I had been this mean…. I had to be mean, to be

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21 In a Think Paper students are required to write what happened, what their role was in the incident and what would be a better choice for next time. See Appendix B.
the heavy. I had to do a lot of things that made me not feel like me as an administrator. Sometimes I felt like I was in fight or flight mode. Some of the students’ stories and situations I dealt with made me very sad. I wanted King Albert to be a safe and happy place.

“When I first went to King Albert, there was not a full time principal in this busy, busy, busy school; I was only point-six principal. [The previous principal] had slated all his teaching time to be Phys. Ed. and that wasn’t my cup of tea. I asked the staff at the first staff meeting if they would mind if I rearranged their schedules, and handed them back their own Phys. Ed. so that I could take on the writing with this particular class. There was a classroom downstairs with a teacher who had come from a Section 20 school, and the Superintendent decided to place her at King Albert. She was given a Grade 2-3 classroom in the basement.

“Based on the styles of classroom management that I saw, which was an adversarial relationship between students and teachers, I thought it would be a good model to have me go down and assist as well as get to know this group of kids. I knew it was probably the most challenging class in the school because it had formed November 1st; when I went in the first time, they were throwing erasers. They refused to work. They had their heads down. There was very little learning happening that I could see. I established some rules and routines. There was no hope of being the good guy in the first few months that I was there. Not at all. I had to be really, really tough. As I said, I made the decision

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22 Section 20 Schools provide educational programs in community based care, treatment, or correctional facilities for school-aged students who, for various reasons, are unable to attend regular schools.
during the March Break though, that if I couldn’t be a little bit of who I was, I couldn’t have taken it.

“The students had no respect for the fact that I was the principal. That meant nothing to them. I decided I needed to show respect to gain respect. So I started by trying to capture what they were interested in. “What would you like to write about?” It was February and I decided that we would model the strategy, because they have so little experience to bring to the task of writing, so we watched Lady and the Tramp because it was Valentine’s Day. Then we deconstructed the media text and turned it into a narrative form by using the First Steps.23 That experience hooked them because now they knew what to put into the narrative form.

“From there I purchased the Treehouse Writing books.24 But when it came to something like writing about sports, you found out that they’re not in community sports. Nobody can afford to put them in sports. They don’t skate. They don’t do anything. Extracurricular is an unknown concept to them. So just finding things to write about was so telling of the community. It was so telling of these kids.25

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23 First Steps developmental indicators in five stages are matched with teaching strategies to bridge to the next stage in Reading Writing and Spelling. As a board consultant, Jane trained as a Tutor to train teachers in the board and used the resource in her own practice as Vice Principal and Principal.
24 Treehouse Writing books are a series of guides with leveled activities for learners at various levels.
25 In a study completed in Huron County, Ontario by the Rural Women Take Action of Poverty Committee in collaboration with the University of Guelph, researchers found that, “rural poverty, and the impact of poverty on rural women and communities, was largely invisible and ignored.” In a series of workshop women spoke about, “their frustration and humiliation dealing with fragmented and at times punitive community services that did not come close to covering their basic needs, but excelled at soul destroying and mind numbing bureaucracy” (Purdon, 2009, p. 6).
“I can’t describe it…. After a few weeks, they trusted me. They looked forward to me coming because I think they knew in that period of time they would always be treated with consistency, caring, and some sense of structure which they lacked. It was my ‘here are the rules, and as long as we follow the rules, and you are participating, we are going to have a good day.’ I just had to be very strict, yet somehow I got their trust. There were a lot of difficulties in that class: I had kids that needed to be on medication, I had one kid that went to a behaviour class before the end of the year. And the EA. I found this out recently, when I heard his name on the radio, that the EA was charged with child molestation. I wondered about him and thought, ‘how did you get to be an EA?’ Anyway, his attendance was erratic and he wasn’t there a lot.

“The key was I got to know this one group of students really, really well. They were my core group to model for others, staff and students, that consistency and caring worked.

“Spending time together at the end of the first year June picnic allowed me to show the school that I cared. We did not have any restrictions on nutrition, so I bought pop and hot dogs and hamburgers and chips and ice cream for the Fun Day. On that day, the school was divided into teams – older kids and younger kids on each of the teams. Each class planned an event for the teams to go through and the classroom teachers ran them with maybe a couple of students helping. The teams rotated through the events after the barbecue. The first year that we did it, we didn’t have any money. We were $6000 in the hole.

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26 Educational Assistant
It was a very, very popular event. We invited the parents the first year and we maybe got two or three, but the following years more parents kept coming. It got to have a real family feel.

“But the first year we had the barbecue and the events. The first year of anything are always a logistical nightmare, but we learned a lot and made changes for the second year. They still had water at Memorial Park then, and so I took a hose with me for a couple of purposes, but then at the end, I called them all and I said, ‘I just have one more thing to say before the end of the year.’ And I can’t even remember exactly what I said, but I sprayed them all with water, and then the water just started flying because there were water balloons left over from one of games, and so it all ended up with everybody laughing together. It was the second-last day of school. It showed them my other side. It was a really popular event.” She smiled as she gazed out the window. “It’s getting late. We should probably get going.”

The blue of the autumn sky was fading as pinks and ambers and yellow streaked across the horizon. Jane shut down her computer and slipped on her jacket. As we headed to our cars she continued, “You know, when I first came to King Albert, I had this big, old metal desk. The previous principal was a big man but the desk came up to the middle of my chest. Every time I moved it, trying to figure out how to arrange the office, jellybeans fell out...

“Before I started at King Albert, I set up a twenty minute interview with each teacher. The pattern that came out of the conversations is that they wanted some discipline; that when they sent a student to the office, they wanted to be
backed up. The former principal’s form of handling office referral was to give them a couple of jelly beans and send them back to class. I found jellybeans three months later. To this day, I cannot stomach a jellybean. I don’t like the look of them. Anyway, we got the desk situated on the back wall facing out into the office area but I couldn’t see anything from where I was, which was not good. After about three months I got a call from Karen at the Board Office — I had been a consultant for five years, so I knew a lot of people in the Board Office — and she said, ‘They are getting me a new desk and I hear that you need one. Would you like me to send over my desk?’ Anyway, the Board Head Custodian brought it to me. I needed to find my space within King Albert.”

We said our goodbyes, got into our cars, and headed in opposite directions. My drive home passed quickly. My mind was flying with questions, thoughts, and stories. I attempted to make sense of what I experienced throughout the day. Though I did this most days, today felt as though I had had a break through. How does a new teacher or new administrator create her own space within an established school community?

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27 I believe it is important to note Jane’s ability to accomplish tasks was because she was well established within the board. Flessa (2005) writes in his article on principals styles and behaviours in the context of urban school leadership that principals, “need to mobilize a variety of strategies to accomplish even the most mundane tasks, and who you know matters” (p. 279). Relying on personal contacts and networks allowed the principal in the study to “get things done.” Flessa determined it was generally a combination of hands-on, who-you-know, clean-house, and establishing routines that occupied more time than instruction. Flessa noted that Hughes (1999), suggested that one must combine the skills of artist, architect, and commissar when considering the combination of knowledge, skills, and beliefs it takes to be effective in school leadership.

28 Jane shared that the board head custodian often worked alongside her to support the students by bringing special furniture, like a proper library lending table, or encouraging student events.
How does a school community begin to meet the needs of all students? How do I understand the vision and trajectory that the school is on? What is my place in it? How do I avoid judging parents and begin to develop relationships with them and their children? How do I stop feeling sorry for students and begin creating opportunities for learning for all within my class and to help them figure out what they need to know? How can a school become a safe and happy place for students to learn? How can I learn from my students?

**Thoughts about Listening**

I felt unprepared for what I experienced in the classroom. During my time there I questioned other teachers, the principal, and parents about their experiences. I listened. I found solace in their stories and guidance from mentors.

Because of the gym construction, the playground size was reduced, the school day did not have an afternoon recess. One afternoon, Lorne one of the taller Grade Twos asked, “Are we going to have a snack?”

“A snack. Sure. Let’s have a break.” Some students had completed the math activity, while others were still working away. I was still trying to learn the balance of how much to plan in a lesson.

I called the class’s attention, “While we continue working, if you have a snack in your bag, you can go, get it, and bring it back to your desk. If you don’t have one, there are some granola bars and a couple of apples in the bowl at the back. If you are still working, please continue. For those who have
finished I am going to read *Up, Up, Down* by Robert Munsch.” The students’ stories taught me how to teach them.

Taking a snack break and reading Robert Munsch turned everything around. The second half of the afternoon was much more productive. The kids’ stayed on task longer and worked more efficiently. We all loved reading, dramatizing, and laughing through Robert Munsch’s stories. It became a daily activity.

I came to graduate school knowing that my experience had been remarkable at King Albert. I wanted as much to tell their story, the transformation that had taken place at the school and in the community, as much as I wanted to understand my own changes. I discovered life history research and began my inquiry. I began listening to others’ stories and to my own in a different way.\(^{29}\)

Personal narrative are a form of reflexive inquiry. I am not interested in telling facts or tips, tricks or techniques for success in schools every day. Rather, I am interested in developing a way of thinking about King Albert Public School not research that focuses on teacher skills, characteristics, and

\(^{29}\) “Listening may not seem like much of a gift to give another person, but it is at least a starting point — and, I would argue, much more. Listening is what the human self most yearns for: to be received, to be heard, to be known, and in the process to be honoured. And listening, deep listening, is what gives rise to the impulse toward personal and social change. But too many of us have stopped listening. We spend our time either ignoring or shouting claims and counterclaims at each other: witness the low quality of public discourse around most of our major issues — including education, where everyone has an answer but no one has an honest question for anyone else! Why is it that we do not like to listen, or want to listen, or know how to listen? I think the answer is simple: we fear hearing something we don’t want to hear, something that might compel us to reflect on ourselves and, in consequence, change our hearts and minds and behaviours. If we can keep talking, not listening, we can define our own reality and will not have to deal with the complexities and ambiguities that lie beyond our simplistic definitions. Listening too carefully might end up confusing us, and we would rather live with clear falsehoods than with complex and challenging truths!” (Palmer P. J., 2002, p. xix-xx)
methods. I am interested in gaining insight to who we are as the stakeholders in the school, and the contexts from which we come, so that we may develop ways of thinking about who our students are. My interest in these stakeholders as holders and makers of knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Knowles et al (2008) write that teaching is deeply personal, it is an expression of who we are as people, wrapped in our beliefs, values, perspectives, and experiences.

The story of King Albert cannot be summed up in teaching strategies for surviving the first year. It is an intricate piece of music with teachers singing the soprano line, the students on the alto, the parents singing tenor, and community members bringing up the bass and the principal the conductor — letting her soloist shine as she sit in the back. This was not a choir that everyone wanted to hear. Their music was not traditional. By working together the song came forth. The complexity of this piece could not be heard if anyone was missing. I am simply listening to their voices. Their songs come from the heart.

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30 At the essence I am interested in their reflexive inquiries. There is a growing field of primary sources of first year teachers in the form of memoirs, journals or reflexive accounts (Kane, 1991; Knowles, Cole & Presswood, 2008) including popularized accounts (such as Gruwell, 1999; McCourt, 2004), and secondary sources in the form of research accounts (see Bullough, 1989; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). However, I diverge from this style to a research approach in which reflexively considering my context, and the context of the school through the voices and stories of others.

31 Following the work of Dewy (1938), Schwab (1970), Polanyi (1958), Gauthier (1963), Johnson (1987), and others, we became fascinated with trying to understand teachers as knowers: knowers of themselves, of their situations, of children, of subject matter, of teaching, of learning.”
9:15 am

Standing in front of this Grade Two class, I hesitate now, to consider my next move. At times like these, when a lesson finishes before recess bell, with not enough time to start the next activity but too much time to just wait, I am never sure what to do. Perhaps I should read a story. Perhaps independent reading. Perhaps a math problem. Perhaps a drama game.

Standing at the front of the class I survey and weigh my options. Krystal, a student with wispy blonde hair which often covers her face floats towards me and says, “Mizz Nicholls, I have a new dog and he is white and he is so funny, and last night he slept in my bed.”

“Really. We had a dog when I was growing up too, though he usually slept with my sister.”

This short random interaction has given me an idea. I turn to the class, “Okay Grade Twos! I am going to hand out a white piece of paper and I would like you to draw a picture of your place. Space becomes place for the child with all its attendant symbolism and politics…. Spaces and places are important not only because they embed and contextualize children, but because they enable an important form of corporeality through which sex, race and culture are experienced rather than imposed” (Atkins, 2001, p. 116, in Corbett, 2009).
most of the space on the paper.” I write on the board as I speak,

2. **Draw a picture of your place.** 3. **One Sentence...** “And then I would like you to write one sentence to tell me about your picture. But what is always step one?”

“Put your name on it.” They chime back. 1. **Name**

**Code of Conduct**

I sat with Darla\(^{33}\) in the library and she explained her first impressions of King Albert.

“When I first came here, there was no teacher supervision at the end of the day outside at the front of the school. That’s a crazy time especially because of the way our school is positioned on the property. In front there is the parking lot and then a busy street. Parents congregate. Some of the parents had issues with each other. In my first year, two mothers got in a fight. Not yelling and screaming but fist fighting on the front stairs of the school. People got hurt. The police were called and it was really uncomfortable for the

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\(^{33}\) When I worked at King Albert Public School, Darla was the Literacy Coach, Librarian, and Core French teacher. She shared with me her background and what brought her to King Albert, “When I moved to Lindsay, I worked for CAS. Lindsay presents itself as this lovely little town, and it is a lovely little town, but there are pockets of real poverty and real neglect and illiteracy. This was my highest referral school when I was a social worker. So when I became a teacher, I wanted to come here because I knew that I kind of ‘get’ these kids. I’ve always worked in a kind of an inner city setting, but here, its ‘inner town’, I guess. I still think that there are teachers, even though they’ve been here awhile, that don’t really have a full understanding of what these kids are dealing with at home. Because a person can’t imagine some of the neglect that these kids live in unless you’ve been in their home. Most of us have never been in their home. For me, I was fortunate enough to be a social worker, and so I’ve done home visits and I know there are kids in this building that are living in neglect and poverty. So, I always keep that in the back of my mind.”
children. They were embarrassed. It was awful. But what came out of that was an awareness that we have to be tighter around issues of kids’ safety. We can’t control everything, of course, but at least that incident changed the climate here. Out of that situation, consistent expectations for behaviour across the school, not just in each classroom, developed; teaching and communicating those expectations to students and parents too. We sent home newsletters with the Code of Conduct which included behaviour expectations. There is lot of teaching going on between the school and the parent community. We have seen a huge decrease in [disruptions]. Now, parents know there are some rules and routines that are established. They have to sign in and get a visitor badge to enter the school. So it’s more contained and controlled, and I think it is a more welcoming feel because of that. More people do come into the school and want to be a part of it because it’s a pleasant and safe place to be. I think the staff also feel more confident in addressing issues, so people also have grown through this. Our school is quite calm right now. We have a few incidents but nothing like when I was first here. When I began, there were fights at recess and lots of suspensions but over time, with rules and routines, Codes of Conduct, consistency and programs like Peer Mediators and PROPS, the kids value school more so they behave better."

PROPS stands for Peers Running Organized Play Stations. Darla described, “Peer Mediators are kids that are trained in problem solving and conflict resolution. They are assigned to each recess to help kids solve minor problems on the yard. For Peer Mediators, the kids go through an extensive six-week training program and then meet monthly. Also, they are training this year in the Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Effective People stuff. I received funding to help with the PROPS. The money will give me some release time so I can train the kids who set up recreational programs outside to encourage inclusion and to make sure that kids remain active rather than staying sedentary out there. We noticed a decrease in the number of office referrals
Bob, a father, described to me his initial reaction to the new rules. He said, “The previous principal was really relaxed. He’s just a wonderful principal. After he retired, Mrs. Avery came in for a few years and things really changed. When she came in, there was no more people just coming in through the halls. You had to come to the office, you signed in. Well! Another parent and I came in and we were just walking over to see our kids, as we’d done so often before and Mrs. Avery stopped us. So, for the first second I thought, you know what, I do not like this because I’ve been here longer than you. And then I got thinking while she was talking, ‘it’s for the safety of the kids.’ I thought, ‘you know what, I’ll put my pettiness aside, and it really worked out for the best.’ I tried the parent council then and we started with two parents, maybe three, for a long time — very difficult, and then we grew with the help of Jane and a few of the other parents, to probably about twelve volunteers on Parent Council.”

as a result of those two programs. It provides a great leadership opportunity for them, which we try to encourage.”

35 In 2000, the Safe Schools Act defined various ways to increase safety, respect and responsibility within Ontario schools. This Act’s purpose is to ensure that schools are safer learning and teaching environments for everyone involved. The School Code of Conduct explained roles and responsibilities to create safer learning and teaching environments. This included policies for expected behaviour, mandatory consequences, limitations to who has access to school premises, and requirement for school boards to collect a criminal background check for all people who come into direct contact with students on a regular basis (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). Though the Safe Schools Act and Jane’s entrance into the school align, she put in place these school policies for other reasons. She wanted to encourage community and parent involvement within a structured environment.

36 Clandinin, et al. (2006, p. 115) wrote:
As their lives met, and sometimes bumped and jarred against each other, we wondered how these meetings sometimes reverberated through and shaped each person’s identity, their stories to live by. (How do stories of school and school stories shape lives?) [I] paid attention to families’ stories and stories of families as we attended to the lives in motion that comprised the storied lives on storied school landscapes….
Later, Jane described a conversation she had recently with a parent who initially was not interested in engaging in the school’s parent community but has become a strong advocate for the school. She asked her why she had not become involved with Parent Council before. The parent replied to Jane, “We didn’t think you’d stay around. We figured you’d be here a year, then gone.” Jane said that by being firm and fair she was able to gain their trust.  

Initial experiences at King Albert greatly impacted how all of the participants interacted with the school. Jane’s initial impression of the school and the interactions with her Grade 2-3 class coloured her lens of the King Albert community. She needed to realign her teaching practice to meet the needs of the students. It helped her to develop continually as an educator as she learned about the community’s socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and needs. It further informed her leadership style and role as an administrator at the school. This provoked other teachers to move along a similar course of reflection and development. The trusting relationships she developed with the

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Bryk and Schneider (2002) state that building trust in school relationships can prevent the decline in social capita, aids in improving student achievement, and affects school policy. They define relational trust as the interpersonal social exchanges in a school community (ie. Principal to teacher, principal to parent, teacher to teacher, teacher to student, teacher to parent). Bryk and Schneider state that relational trust is built on four criterion: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity. Respect is the recognition of the role each person plays in a child’s education. Competence in the execution of a role is the ability a person has to achieve the desired outcomes. Personal regard for others is the perception of how one goes beyond what is required of their role in caring for another person. Integrity can be described as the consistency between what people say and what they do (p. 20). Bryk and Schneider emphasize that if there is a strong feeling of trust between the people in a school community the more successful that school in the community will be in educating the students.
Grade 2-3 class also helped her to establish connections within the parent community.
Chapter 3. The Breakfast Club

9:22am

Now, in the Grade Two classroom, I assure the students that we will be called down to see the new gym soon. Across the hall I hear the voices of twenty Grade Ones and the voice of their teacher, “One. Two. Three. Eyes on me.” “One. Two. Eyes on you.” They chant back. As they march along the hall, a little boy in an orange shirt catches my eye and waves.

"RACHAEL!...ARE YOU THERE?" sounds the principal, Jane Avery, over the PA system in my office. "I don't have anyone to open the Breakfast Club room. Can you go down?"

"Sure. What do I have to do?"

"Just open it up. The kids will show you."

At the bottom of the stairs, across from the library students bunch together chatting and laughing, some take off their coats and bags, and one older sister flattens her younger brother dishevelled hair, turns his orange shirt right side out and gently scolds him under her breath.

I open the door to the basement room, flick on the lights, and students quickly slide into chairs at tables of four. Two Grade Five students help me and explain the routines. Efficiently food is taken out of the refrigerator and deep freezer. Orders are taken, food distributed. The smell of toast fills the air.
The little boy in the orange shirt devours three pieces of toast and a banana, then he bounced out to the yard. Students shake cereal into colourful plastic bowls. The room quiets a little as mouths fill with food. Students place used bowls, cups, and plates in the dishwasher. As soon as some students finish and leave, others file in. When the bell rings, I hand out granola bars to trailing students and sent them off to class.

“Hey, uh, Miss...” A big Grade Six boy shuffles his feet in front of me.

"I'm Ms. Nicholls,” I introduce myself with a smile.

He looks into my eyes, “um, thanks, Ms. Nicholls.”

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When I caught up with Jane later in the day, she asked, “How was Breakfast Club this morning?”

“Amazing,” I responded. “We fed a lot of kids in a very short time! I don’t know what I would have done without those two Grade Five girls!” I laughed. “It was nice to meet some of the juniors, especially my students’ older brothers and sisters.”

“Early on I found that the Breakfast Club was really, really important and if there weren’t volunteers in the Breakfast Club room, I went down and fed them. That seemed to make such a difference,” Jane says.

“Did you start the Breakfast Club or has it been here for a while?” I ask.

“I’m not sure when it started but it has been here for a number of years. What I love about Breakfast Club is that it is not a food line. Children sit down, orders are taken, and food is brought to them. It was another area to model
respects. Often it was grandmothers who volunteered here, retired Bell workers and then Church ladies.” She explained that it had almost been closed because of lack of funds or volunteers a few times. Once the Health Unit nearly shut it down. “It was the summer after my first year here that they put in a new kitchen. Penny, from the United Way, taught me how to write proposals. It had an old tin ceiling and a horrible air exchanger that they moved into the hall. The reason that I got this new kitchen was because the Health Unit wanted three sinks. I made it known to the Board how important the Breakfast Club was and insisted that it not be closed.”

Darla added, “Many of the kids here don’t get well fed at home. Breakfast is a critical part of their day. I write a lot of proposal writers. I try to get as much money into the building as I can; I got two grants this year for Breakfast Club. I have also written letters to local organizations to get more money. Currently we are operating in a deficit. I’ve written blurbs for the newsletter asking parents for money. Even if they can give two bucks it would help out a little bit. Today, I was talking with the kids down here in library and said, ‘Even if you can donate 50 cents.’ I try to encourage even though they are the kids using the program, that if they could give back, than they have the good feeling that they’ve contributed something. One of the kids said, ‘I got

Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, and Ciuffetelli Parker (2010, p. 15) write, “…the fact that already-strapped communities are unlikely to have the resources to raise additional funds for schools, no matter how interested in or useful they would find such an endeavor. As advocacy group People for Education (2008) noted in a recent report:

While fundraising has been commonplace in Ontario schools for many decades, the growing amounts raised are cause for concern. Some affluent neighbourhoods have the capacity to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for their public schools; other neighbourhoods, where parents’ incomes are lower, raise little if any money. Thus, some schools have significantly enhanced resources, such as better stocked libraries and enrichment programs.”
ten dollars for my birthday, I can bring that in.’ You don’t want to discourage it, but at the same time I am thinking ‘no, no, no.’ He was feeling good about wanting to give that. That is what I am trying to encourage. There is lots of learning that goes on before nine am and after three, at lunchtime, at recess, and in-between walking from one class to the next, that doesn’t get counted in the data,” she laughs.39

Thoughts about Sharing Food

Growing up, I heard stories from my grandparents about neighbours coming together for barn raisings, or to plough each other’s fields. My extended family was very close; they never needed an invitation to our home and my mother was always ready to make a meal no matter how many might be at the kitchen table. My parents always had enough to share. I remember casseroles and baked goods showing up at my grandmother’s home when my grandfather died.

When I travelled to Ecuador after graduation I observed a “minga,” a Quechua word meaning ‘the coming together of people for the betterment of all.’ Families gathered to fix the stones on the road leading into their village. Mamas with their babies tied to their backs made food in large pots on the grassy side of the road for everyone. The word “minga” encompasses and

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39 “What happens in schools is an identity-shaping process; lives are written and rewritten, storied and restoried. The identities, the stories to live by of children, teachers, administrators, and families are all being expressed, and, in those expressions, become open to being restoried, to being silenced, to being erased, to being shifted in educative and mis-educative ways…” (Clandinin, et al., 2006, p. 116)
expresses the spirit of community which is central to the lives of these indigenous people.

In telling the stories that surround King Albert Public School, participants spoke of food, sharing, and its centrality to the culture and community which has been developed at KAPS. Darla emphasized the importance of getting to know students and suggested that this can be done through sharing food: “…have conversations with them. ‘What do you like to do? What did you do on the weekend? What do your parents like to do?’ Sometimes I just sit around with my class. Or, like last week, we had volleyball pizza lunch and we chatted. That’s something else I stress. Buy lots of food. You can get through lots of things with food.” She also spoke about connecting with parents over food: “We had a family that we rallied around last year whose father was in a really serious accident and fell off a roof. The staff raised a lot of money, and we gave the family a whole turkey dinner and gifts. I went to that family’s house and had a visit with the mother and gave her the paperwork on how to fill out stuff for ODSP. Some of the parents don’t know that kind of support is available. They welcomed me into their home, even though I was a teacher.”

Jane spoke about trying to reach parents: “In my second year, I started the Family Barbecue night in the fall. I got M&Ms burgers and barbecues. So for five dollars a family, they could have a hot dog or hamburger, ice cream and a drink. I can remember Dad coming and saying, ‘You’re not making any

40 Ontario Disability Support Program is an income support program to help people with disabilities who are in financial need pay for living expenses.
41 M&M’s Meat Shop
money on this?’ And, I said, ‘That’s not the point Dad, the point is to get the families out.’

Parent Council Chair, Anne, told me about the Christmas Dinner: “It’s quite the event. I heard from the past custodian, who is the oldest person at King Albert that I know, he told me that originally when they decided to do a Christmas dinner everybody took a turkey home and cooked it, and brought it in with ten pounds of mashed potatoes. It evolved over the years. When I started Chairing, the past Parent Council Chair was basically begging, borrowing, and stealing stuff from all over Lindsay to do this dinner, a ladle from here, and a pot from there. It was crazy. So when she handed over the reins, I thought, ‘there is no way I am doing that.’ Fortunately, I have the employer that I do, and she said, ‘You can just use our kitchen.’ So, I started working and it became a huge dinner with turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, vegetables, dessert, and drinks. It’s all prepared at the Lindsay Inn and then moved over to be served. What an amazing thing it is to see these kids having this dinner. They are just so excited.” I nod as she continues, “For them it’s really a celebratory thing. And I have actually had a couple of parents turn up to volunteer, and they sit down with their kids to eat and tell me that is their Christmas dinner too. They volunteer so that they can eat with their kids. So we purposely cook too much and huge packages go home with volunteers. Some know that and that’s why they volunteer for the day. That’s fine with me. That’s a sense of belonging too. For them to show up, help out, and then at the end they get this huge food package. That’s community.”
“The parents don’t feel like it is a hand out — they’ve worked for it.”

“It’s a great experience. The past Parent Council Chair used to do a prayer or grace. So we changed that, which was a little disturbing for me, but I understood. Before the dinner we just say, everybody think about whoever it is you want to think about and give thanks because this is a great meal. You see them stop and think. And I think, RIGHT ON! It’s cool. We always invite a couple of people from the Board and they come and serve at it. The past custodian, who had been at King Albert for many years, always comes for it and helps every year. It’s a tradition and the adults enjoy it as much as the kids do.”

“I was very surprised to see some of the Board people there, like the Special Education Consultant and a few others…” I said.

“We put out a Board-wide invitation. Anyone who wants to help is welcome. A few come every year. This year, the word is out in the community about this dinner. The local Home Hardware store manager called us and said, ‘We want to help financially with your Christmas dinner. And we want to volunteer too.’ Every year they do something as a group of employees, and this year they wanted to do something local and somebody mentioned the Christmas Dinner. They did bake sales in their store for weeks to raise money and showed up with a cheque that paid for probably three quarters of it,” she says.

“It’s a great experience. We are sitting here talking about all these things that this one small school has going on; when you think about it in terms of
that, that’s pretty amazing. We have two hundred kids. But there is constantly something going on. It’s a great school. I love King Albert,” she says.

“I love King Albert too,” I say.

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Teaching at King Albert challenged me to consider the conversations that were left out of my teacher preparation. Issues of poverty, food security, housing, developing community outside of the classroom, engaging and honour parents, listening and asking honest questions stayed unearthed in my professional preparation. Because what the preparation I received prioritized instead was becoming a classroom teacher, focusing on curriculum and creating a positive learning environment inside one’s own classroom. But guided by mentors, these issues were at the forefront of my learning and teacher development at King Albert Public School.
Chapter 4. Halloween

Elementary schools emphasize celebrations. Our class read stories, made art, and discussed costumes the entire week before Halloween.

My family has a long history of celebrating and dressing up and pretending. My maternal grandmother, Pam, made costumes for Halloween, and for the many plays two of my aunts put on in their schools and classrooms. Eventually everyone added to the Costume Cupboard filling two double closets in Pam's basement. Any time of year, my sisters and cousins and I would pull costumes out of the cupboard to present plays for our parents. At Halloween, my sisters and I often coordinated our costumes into a theme. One year it was the Wizard of Oz: Jacquelyn was Dorothy with a gingham dress and sparkly red shoes, Catherine dressed in a pink frilly gown with a star-wand was Glinda the Good Witch, and I, with my face painted green and a pointy hat, was the Wicked Witch of the West. In high school and university, I acted and directed theatre productions and we altered, redesigned, and added to the Costume Cupboard pieces.

Early in the week while I was on yard duty, Malcolm ran over and asked, "What are you going to dress up as, Mizz Nicholls?"

I said, "I'm not sure yet. I have a couple of ideas."
Mitchell bounced along beside me, "If you glued little packages of smarties on your pants, Mizz Nicholls, you could be a smarty pants." His large grin revealed a missing front tooth.

I laughed long and hard.

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I arrived at school on October 31st, after spending the morning back-combing my short brown hair and adding volume with hairspray, wearing a pink and yellow polka dot 1950s-style dress with a knee-length crinoline filled skirt.

The school buzzes with excitement. In my classroom, fairies flit with monsters, a Dalmatian plays with Spiderman, and a couple of kids are in the corner of the room with the Educational Assistant, Ms. B.

As Ms. B. pulls extra costumes out of a bag fitting children with different pieces the children duck and turn slipping on the costumes quickly so as not to be noticed.

"Mizz Nicholls, do you like my dress?" I turn around to the group and redirect students from this area.

"Oh yes, Krystal, you look beautiful!

"Grade Twos, Let’s meet on the carpet."

I did not even consider that some of my students may not have costumes. My family has an entire wardrobe of them. I could have brought some.
That evening, I spent a lot of time reflecting on the events of the day. I began revising some of my assumptions and perspectives. This is a point of learning for me. How many times do teachers think of identities and realities different to our own? At how many times have I and will I reconsider my positioning? Do new teachers think about our place which is different from the students we teach? Though I grew up in the same place geographically, I am not in the same place now.

A Conversation with Darla

I meet Darla later in the day in the library. We pick out books as we co-plan our next literacy lesson. We chat causally about the day, then I say, “One of the rumours I heard about King Albert before I came here was that there is a high teacher turnover but it seems like there are also a large group that have been here a number of years, like you. Why do you think people say that about King Albert? Why have you stayed?”

“It takes a certain kind of person to stay here. I was talking to a new teacher about that yesterday. I said, ‘this place isn’t for everybody’.”

“What do you think it takes?” I ask.

“You have to have a certain level of maturity and a certain level of not always focusing — I don’t want to say ‘not always focusing on the academics’

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42 “Sometimes in reflection teachers begin to retell their stories, that is, to actively understand that they are writing their lives. The retelling of their stories is only part of what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) called a restorying process. There is also a reliving part of restorying. In reliving their stories, teachers may begin to imagine themselves in new ways and to change their practices, the ways they lived in the world” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006).
but you have to deal with the full package. I say to the kids in my class, ‘everybody has stuff in their backpack. We don’t know what someone brings in their backpack. Maybe they had a rough morning.’ You have to be able to put your lesson plan aside if you need to deal with a social issue or an issue involving violence or if somebody hasn’t eaten. For some people, they just want to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. But dealing with the other issues is teaching also. So people have left because of that. Another teacher and I were talking the other day about how certain people come and stay because they like being here. We like the challenge of trying to reach those kids.

“I’m honest and upfront. I try to show my human side. I laugh at myself, at my own mistakes. I show my sensitive side. If I’m up all night with a sick kid, I tell them I am a mum first. Let them have some control. I am not a control freak. I like them to have a big role in their own education. I do a lot of cooperative learning. I emphasize learning how to get along with people. In the real world you don’t sit in rows.\(^\text{43}\) You have to get along with people and be social. I feel that our role is to get them involved in reaching their social goals as well as their academic goals.

“But there’s been a big change. People who haven’t been here as long as I have say, ‘This is so nice and calm right now.’ But you never know, because you’re not sure what’s coming through the door — the kids next year

\(^{43}\) One of Darla’s primary goals is to teach students for their future outside of the classroom, preparing students for a future that is unknown coincide with Ontario citizen desire for their children. “The goal of these 21st century schools will be to have students graduate with diverse skills and capacities: able to deal with risk and ambiguity. Students leaving these schools will have the capacity to think creatively and deal effectively with change (The People for Education, 2010). Paulo Freire describes this process; “...to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production and construction of knowledge.”
or who is going to transfer in. I think there is definitely a climate of positivity. But King Albert’s had quite a big shift. The kids are very lucky because there is a caring staff and there is a community that is helping out a lot.

“I said to my kids in my class, ‘You are very fortunate. Other kids at other schools don’t have some of what you have here.’ We have teamed up with so many organizations: the Health Unit has given money for sports equipment; the Poverty Coalition\textsuperscript{44} is involved doing many different things; and the Optimus Club donated money to us to buy new sports uniforms. So there’s a new community connection which was lacking before. There is an awareness in the community that this school has it’s issues with poverty and now it’s not a negative image, it’s a ‘how can I help’ image. Home Hardware has paid for the Christmas dinner. People want to help. They recognize that there are needs in this community; right here, there are kids living in poverty. There is a huge increase in community involvement. There is more awareness and less stigma attached to poverty. Being visible in the community has helped; we go to the Theatre and Remembrance Day service. We have had a number of positive articles recently in the newspaper, and that shifts people’s perceptions.”

“It shapes your reputation in a new way,” I nod.

“The concern sometimes, though, is, ‘Where does the school role end?’ Some people get frustrated with that feeling of enabling. Are we enabling? Like we have a Breakfast Program, we’ll make somebody lunch. So there is that question, Is that not a parent’s responsibility? And yes, it is, but you can’t

\textsuperscript{44} The Poverty Coalition is a local initiative comprised of individual volunteers and organizations interested in poverty issues within the City of Kawartha Lakes.
let a child go hungry at the same time. You have to bring it to a parent’s attention that this is not okay. But I’ve got one guy in my class; he hasn’t brought a lunch or a snack for a month. That’s Grade Six. So, we adjust those things. We always provide food, because you can’t let them go hungry. But I think some teachers don’t want to deal with that stuff, or don’t want to know.45 It seriously impacts kids learning.”

We finished planning our lesson, and I left thinking about different types of teachers and how impactful language can be. I wondered about how the negative stories we tell to each other within the school and the stories we tell to other people impact our practice. I began trying to shift the way I thought about King Albert and the stories that I told, so that I may be part of what helps to transform the reputation of this school. I wanted to be one of the teachers who could stay and affect some change in the students’ lives and in my own.

A Conversation with Leanne46

It is the morning before Parent-Teacher interviews and as the recess bell rings, I escape into the Junior Resource room and deflate into one of Leanne’s

45 Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli Parker (2010) write: …When is talking about outside-of-school factors an exercise in hand-washing, and when is it an appropriate articulation of the context-specific challenges to policy and practice…? Teachers in high poverty schools very often encounter students who face learning challenges relating to social needs…. Persistent gaps in achievement, however, raise a concern that when educators talk too much about social needs of students, they may be neglecting these same students’ academic needs.

Inherent within this statement is the judgement teachers place on out-of-school influences. Flessa et al. continue by stating, “Academic and co-curricular enrichment for students in conjunction with professional development for teachers shows the importance of multiple responses to the challenges schools face regarding poverty. Focusing on students without addressing teachers’ attitudes, or focusing solely on teachers without proposing nuts-and-bolts alternatives for students would only have limited [the school’s] initiatives” (pp. 24-25).

46 At the time of the interviews, Leanne was the Junior Resource teacher.
chairs that encircle the round table in her office. “Honestly, Leanne, I don’t know what I am doing. I feel like…, I mean, how do I get them to …” I trail off.

“Don’t worry. All first year teachers feel this way. I remember my first class, we were in a portable and there were thirty children. I was certain someone was going to find me out and pull me. Try to think about what your goals are; who you are and why you wanted to teach in the first place. When I was in a classroom at King Albert, my kids did goal setting and every week they set new goals, and strategies to achieve each one. I think you have to enable, you have to give up a lot of control to do it. I want kids to take ownership of their learning. It is a really powerful thing when you let kids take it and run with it. And they will always. But I think it is something you always have to focus on. I think it is something that has to be taught and expected.

“Also I want kids to be aware of who they are as learners. I think that is why I love teaching in the junior grades; they are starting to get it and they make conscious decisions about ‘Who am I?’ ‘What do I want?’ ‘Where am I going?’ ‘How do I get there?’ I want kids to know that’s who teachers should be for them — part of the how to get there.

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47 While the memory of the classroom experience as a student is not far for me to remember, juggling the new role as a teacher is more complex. “From outside, teaching seems like an easy task. Once inside, however, you learn quickly that working in schools is precisely the opposite. Classrooms, which at one time seemed to you to be relatively simple environments, turn out to be complex ecosystems” (Knowles, Cole & Presswood, 2008, p. 273).

48 Initially, I wanted to teach because I loved working with children. However, I came to understand the potential power education has to transform a person and a situation. With knowledge of how the world works, I hope that we may become and more caring, compassionate and responsible world.
“Kids are going to choose the path they are going to choose. They may go off the trail and you have to say ‘When you are willing to come back on, I’m here, and ready to help you out.’ I think empowerment is the biggest thing I would like kids to get out of school. That’s kind of who I am and why I teach,” said Leanne.

“When I started teaching, I wouldn’t have thought so. My Bachelor of Education year surprised me with how many bitter people I met within the program and within schools. But now I do too. You, and a few others here, have really shown me what is possible.

“Also, it’s really interesting being back in Lindsay, and being at King Albert. It is very different from how I remember it growing up,” I said.

“I came from Peel District so being in Lindsay is interesting.” Leanne continues, “It’s a small town and the fact that it is predominately white is fascinating and poses some other challenges. So you have the mostly white factor, you have the socio-economic challenges, and you have the “small town” dynamic, which is a dynamic all its own. The mix of all those things adds to the fun and the challenges.49

49 Leanne and I had another conversation around a lack of current and historical social issues discussed in classroom. She gave the example of the tsunami in 2005 or Martin Luther King Day. She said, “Last week Barack Obama was sworn in. Monday was Martin Luther King Day. No one in our building acknowledged it. We’ve known for months that January the 20th, 2009 that he was coming in. Nobody did the important pre-teaching leading up to why that was such a huge deal. I don’t care if our kids are black or not. That’s important social justice. Kids get social justice. Kids get what’s fair and not.” Mara Tieken in her article Making Race Relevant in All-White Classrooms: Using Local History (2008), wrote, “One of the best ways I found to get my students talking critically and concretely about issues of race was to address the very ‘whiteness’ of the town, to examine, with students, how this demographic profile was created… students learn about the relationships among [various] groups and talk about the rules and practices that shaped these interactions” (p. 201).
“King Albert is an interesting place for me because I grew up white, middle-class, in a certain generation and I can hear my father’s voice sometimes, and I don’t particularly like it, but ‘People shouldn’t be on welfare, la la la,’ and then I hear my voice ‘but but but….’ I find I teeter back and forth sometimes, you can’t help that. That was part of my growing up, part of the conversation that I was in, so it that becomes part of who are. I struggle with that. It is just tough to be part of that conversation.”

“It’s like you say. You acknowledge where you’ve come from and as soon as you can see that…. I said.

She finishes my sentence, “It puts you at a different place because you are aware of it and hopefully will challenge yourself on it when you feel yourself sinking in to it. I think King Albert is a place where you have to go in and be open and unpack your judgements at the door and recognize and see who the kids are. Otherwise I don’t think you will be able to be effective. Your judgements will seep out onto the kids. We’ve had a number of teachers make negative comments about kids. But they are coming with the best of what they can bring you and you have got to meet them where they are.”

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50 Paulo Freire (2005) writes, “We have a strong tendency to affirm that what is different from us is inferior…. One of the challenges to progressive educators…is not to feel or to proceed as if they were inferior to dominant-class learners…, nor should they feel superior to the learners…who do not eat well, who do not ‘dress nicely’, who do not ‘speak correctly’…. Progressive, coherent educators [should not] let themselves be tempted by the hypothesis that these children, these poor little ones, are naturally incapable” (p. 128). He continues by challenging educators to consider their world and their perspectives and to attempt to be open to that which is different from your own understandings. He calls for teacher preparation programs to weave complex theories with concrete contexts in the world. Teachers must breakdown the belief that theory and practice are binary opposites which have no relation, and understand the importance of both.
“I had a teacher in high school who said the same thing to us. She always asked us to give one-hundred percent. She said she realized that today you might only have eighty percent or even sixty percent to give. But she wanted one-hundred percent of that eighty percent or sixty percent. She expected of us the very best that we could give every day, recognizing that there wasn’t necessarily consistency between days.”

She nods, “You can’t control everything. You can’t control what your kids are coming in with, as much as we wish we could. We can’t, so we have to let it go. What you can control are certain things. You can control that they have access to food in the building; you can control the kind of language that is permissible; you can control that they are given good role models and opportunities for leadership and chances to see what goodness is and be exposed to things that they wouldn’t be exposed to outside of school. You can do all that. So you have to let go of the things that you can’t control. Otherwise you can’t stay, because I think it makes you bitter and hard, which is not good.

“It’s a challenging place and there are times when it’s hard not to bring it home because it breaks your heart. Sometimes you get really mad when parents don’t return phone calls, or don’t show up to interviews, or don’t send their kids with proper clothing or lunch. It is hard not to be judgemental, sit on the hill, and say ‘Thou shalt, thou shalt, thou shalt,’ but we just don’t know the stories. If anything being at King Albert has taught me that before you stand
back and judge you need to take a step back and really…” she breaths deeply and emphasizing looking around the room.

She pauses for a moment before continuing, “I think kids genuinely know if you care. I always say my goal for teaching is unleashing good people on the world.” We chuckle and nod.

“Any advice for my Parent-Teacher interviews tonight?” I ask.

“My thing with parents is the very first thing out of my mouth has to be how great their kids are and how I like them. I think parents need to hear that, I think they need to feel that you listen to them. And with the hard stuff, I think you have to avoid being in their face but they need to be aware that you care. Even the toughest parents you can win over.”

“I got my students to write letters and draw pictures welcoming their parents and guardians into our class, and to write their favourite thing about school,” I said. “I am hoping to encourage the students to speak to their parents about school.”

“Have fun.”

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After speaking with Leanne, I thought about a story I had read about an iceberg:

An iceberg floats in the sea but we only see the tip. Behaviours are the tip of the iceberg – what we can see and describe happening with people and in our communities. Under the water is the greatest mass of the iceberg. This is the region of attitudes, beliefs, and values. They are unseen and often unspoken, but powerfully shape and support behaviour and the kind of action that is taken to address poverty. If we hope to change unhelpful and discriminatory behaviours and take more effective action to address rural poverty we need to acknowledge the link between behaviours
and attitudes. If we want to change the way we deal with poverty (behaviour) we will need to change the way we think about poverty as well (attitudes and beliefs)” (Purdon, 2009, p. 12).

It became important to me to consider my thoughts around poverty and the stories that I tell, as my attitudes, beliefs, and values were influences the way I interacted in the school building, the way I interacted with the community and the way I interacted with the students. I wanted to connect honestly with students and to create opportunities for discussion within learning.

A Conversation with Bob

“It’s really hard to keep someone’s attention when you’re trying to teach skills. I say to the students, ‘You know what, you need to pay attention.’ I’m pretty firm in certain areas where other people might not be. I just want the best for these kids and I want them to feel that. So sometimes we redirect them and redirect them and there again, if they can’t comply, then maybe this isn’t the right time for you and we’ll come back to it. But we have a few success stories. I walked in to talk to one of the EAs, Mrs. B., and there was a young chap rolling around in the coats in the coatroom. So I told him, ‘Well you need to get up. That’s not acceptable.’ Apparently he does that every day. I talked to him and said ‘Well, why are you doing this?’ He said, ‘Well, my parents say I’m going to have a bad day every day.’ I said, ‘Don’t think so. I think

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51 Bob is an Educational Assistant at King Albert Public School
52 Educational Assistant
53 Paulo Freire (2005) writes, “There are moments in which the teacher, as the authority, talk to the learners, says what must be done, establishes limits without which the very freedom of learners is lost in lawlessness, but these moments, in accordance with the political options of the educator, are alternated with others in which the educator speaks with the learner”(p. 112). With increased communication and collaboration amongst teachers, educational assistants, resource staff and the principal, King Albert broaden its approach to ways of learning. Different learning styles including self-directed learning, goal setting, experiential learning, social intelligence skills, and individualized learning became part of the regular programming.
you’re making the decision.’ Anyway, I found out that he wanted to be on the PROPS\textsuperscript{54} squad and I said to him ‘You’ve got to earn that right.’ ‘Oh, I’m going to really try hard’ and I said, ‘That’s all I ask.’ So I kept in touch with his teacher and after three weeks, I mean it was slow, but he was trying. So now, he’s in the PROPS squad and he’s doing his work!

“All we now have kids doing recycling with Mrs. B. It’s really good. They have to work for a few weeks before they get their own rubber gloves with their name on it, but when they get that, they are really proud. She put a nice slant on that. And he’s also trying out for that. So this child has made a really big gains. There was a few of the kids, their lifestyle’s rough at home but when they come to school, they have positive things. They’re on the recycling; they live for this. To you and me, the names on the rubber gloves, what’s that? Their names on these rubber gloves, that’s a status thing for them and they’re right into that. Through the ingenuity of a few people we’ve done really well.

“But it seems there are certain few children that struggle with life and schoolwork. We definitely try to show them that they’re important. They’ll come and talk to us and let us know what the problem is. We acknowledge it. I think that’s where they see it. I can’t see me working anywhere but King

\textsuperscript{54} PROPS – Peers Running Organized Play Stations
Albert. I mean, people say ‘Why?’ and I say ‘because it’s great.’ It can be hard. But I think we all bring different things.55

“The kids that I worked with as soon as they found out that I had abilities in art to offer them, that closed the gap between us. Some people would say, ‘Oh, you’ve got to watch out, this person has violent tendencies,’ or whatever. But we didn’t even go near that area. I’d see the kids doodling, and think, ‘oh I’d got you now.’ Then I would start teaching them to do three-dimensional drawings and something else new to them. I’ve built strong connections. To this day, one child, and it’s been like about four years, he always comes in to see me. These are the wonderful things I like.”

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Early on in my teacher preparation professors emphasized the importance of establishing connections with students. While teaching at King Albert there were times when I felt overwhelmed with work and feelings of sadness, anger, or frustration. Bob often stopped by to remind me that we were not alone and that, in working together, we all had something to bring to students, to take joy in small achievements, and to never stop trying to empower kids. Bob reinforced theories from my teacher preparation and helped me to develop as an educator by showing different ways to make connections with students in order to meet their needs.

55 Greg, the principal following Jane, spoke to me about having the appropriate people working in the best positions in the school. He felt the combination of staff was essential. He said, “Michael Fullan says it best. You know, having the right people on the bus. But then having the right people in the right seats on the bus.” Bob is speaking to that point. At the time of the interview, he felt that there was a good combination of staff who could bring different skills to meet the students needs” (see Fullan, Hill & Crévola, 2006, p. 97).
Chapter 5. The Gym Opening

9:25am

Here in the November sun, on our way to the gym, I look over my group and think a lot has happened to us. I was hired for four weeks but I have stayed three months. Even now I notice the changes in the faces of some of the kids. These changes came without sound, slowly, and over time. And like their situations, and for their teaching needs, I changed too. I think about how much the school has changed and how it will continue to once the gym is open to the public. All of these changes are important. I think about the first addition that went onto the school and how no one here can identify just when that happened, ‘sometime in the 1960s though.’ I wondered how people will feel about the gym six, eight, or even fifteen years from now. Noah Richler (2007, p. 6) writes, “Any place is only a landscape until it is animated by the stories that provide its identity…. The sum of stories that are told about or in a particular landscape create an impression of a place that is imaginary, but functions as any map would, for places are as real as persons, but they have no voice and so they
"speak to us through art." Growing up in Lindsay, I drove past King Albert Public School many times, but it was only through hearing the stories and living my own that the depth of the school’s complexity and identity was made real through the people that learned and lived here.

A Conversation with Anne

One parent told me if I really wanted to know about King Albert Public School, I should speak to the Chair of the Parent Council Anne, and that he would connect us. We sat around her kitchen table and she shared with me her role as Chair of the Parent Council at the school as well as the District Council Chair, and as a mother. At the time of our meeting, she had two children attending King Albert Public School and a third son who graduated the previous year. It was her third year as Chair of the Council.

“What are some of your roles at the school level and at the district level?” I asked.

“At the school level, it’s interesting actually. It’s a different dynamic because there are parents that are involved with the whole school and ones who are particularly interested in their particular kid’s education at the school are on council. They are a lot more volatile. Whereas on the district level we are looking at Board wide interests of the children, of course, so people who are looking at kids in the Board on the whole, as opposed to their own particular
child. It is at the back of their mind, but it is a little different dynamic; less volatile at the meetings.

“That’s interesting. How did you get involved?” I asked.

“When KAPS formed a council, they had two members. They invited me to a meeting the second year. And there were still only three members, I believe. In terms of my involvement at a Chair-level, that was because the previous Chair was leaving and asked me to take over. It’s just that simple,” she said.

“So, what are some of the specific things that you do? What does the role look like?” I asked.

“It’s basically a management role. We use Robert’s Rules of Order, so that took a bit of education. It’s a lot more stringent than casually run meetings, but we have some problems in our council. So, it is easier to have rules, so that when there is a disagreement, not on the grounds of the school or anything like that, but at the meeting itself. So, if there is a disagreement happening, and it happens sometimes, then I stand in. The hardest part for me was learning to say things that I am not used to saying. I am the type of person who works to avoid conflict. All of a sudden I am thrown in this role where I have to tell people exactly and wait for their reaction.”

“How many members does the Council have?” I ask.

“We have fifteen. But, at every meeting — it’s probably between six and ten depending on what the agenda entails. Some people are fair-weather members who come only if there is a topic that interests them. When we were building the gym, we had fifteen to twenty members at every meeting.
“Can you tell me about that experience?” I ask.

“Sure. That was probably the best experience I have ever had involving my kid’s education. It was quite emotional for me. We started to advocate for the gym probably the first year I was Chair. I sat down at the meeting and said, ‘I want a gym.’ Everyone at the Council went, ‘Psht. Yeah, right. We’re tiny little KAPS. We have two-hundred kids. Not the most highly sought-out school in the district, right? Not going to happen.’ I found out that we were the only school that didn’t have one. Well, that is a heck of an argument. Rick Johnston, the School Board Trustee, came onboard; he was a huge advocate for our kids. And Jane, of course, was right onboard. She was so excited that someone was going to advocate for this. So we started the campaign; and it was really slow. We had a couple of years where we would go to Board meetings and we would just sit there. If the topic was on the agenda we would all perk up,” she giggled imitating the action of parents rising up attentively in their chairs. “They would always acknowledge our presence, saying, ‘We have some parents here from King Albert. I am sure they are interested in our topic.’ But it would always get pushed off, as if they didn’t want to talk about it in front of us. Eventually Rick Johnston said, ‘These kids need a gym.’ There had been maybe fifty letters written to the Board. I called the Board Office maybe sixty times. All of the Council called: ‘Do you have a decision about King Albert’s gym?’ Just really nice, never negative, never mean, or abrupt, but always: ‘What do you think about that?’”
“In the end, we involved the media and asked them to ask the Board what was going on. They finally said yes. Jane is an amazing principal in terms of involving parents and decision-making. Other principals may be more reluctant and afraid, but Jane has a clear understanding of the fact that parents are your biggest ally — or can be. So, she used that. She brought me to decision-making meetings with the gym architect as a parent voice. She had me deciding about colours and things that normally you wouldn’t have any effect on at all. That was huge for me."56

“When construction began, Parent Council sent coffee down to the construction workers. It was a very thoughtful process.

“In the end, when it was built, it is absolutely gorgeous. Every time I walk in there, I get goose bumps, and I think, ‘Look what we did. Just look at it.’ It’s just awesome. The kids deserve it. They weren’t getting a fair shake. Clearly they weren’t getting a fair shake because of who they are. I really believe that, because it’s easy to settle when you think it is what you deserve."57

56 Parents on the School Council became engagement in what Joyce Epstein (2001) calls “Decision Making.” This group of parents made decisions about major changes to the school which would affect them and their children for years to come.

57 Often people repeat the implicit narrative told by others that they are not worth the effort. Listening to single stories can be dangerous, especially for young minds who are shaping their identity and understanding of the world. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes, “I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So the year I turned eight we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn’t finish my dinner my mother would say, “Finish your food! Don’t you know? People like Fide’s family have nothing.” So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday we went to his village to visit. His mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket, made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them is how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.
I think that is what happens in a school like KAPS. They think that the parents, the types of parents that we have in our school will settle. In the past, they just settled for the fact that their kids don’t have a gym. Then someone stands up and says, ‘Well, everybody else has a gym. Our kids should have a gym.’ And they go, ‘Yeah.’ But, they need to hear it. So, it was so incredible.”

“That is awesome,” I say.

“The media came to the grand opening — newspaper, radio... One of them pulled me aside and said, ‘How does it feel?’ I couldn’t think of any words. I stood staring at her, ‘You are going to have to say something,’ she laughs. I was so awestruck by the whole thing. And the kids love it. They are in there all the time. They take great care of it, which makes me so proud. Although, now the original Grade Sixes that had the gym are gone. Two years of kids are gone that saw that gym come in. So, that brings it home that eventually none of the kids that saw that gym arrive will still be there, it’s not that long of away, I guess three or four years. So then it will be interesting to see what the dynamic is like.”

“It will be interesting to talk to those kids in a few years.” I say.

What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories.”
“Yeah, it would be cool if the kids that were in kindergarten when they get to Grade Six present to all the other kids somehow about what happened. That would be cool. Write that down.” We laugh. 58

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9:30am

I lead my Grade Twos around the corner. We walk past the new change rooms and washrooms, then past the new custodian office, and the door to the new serving kitchen. The cabinets sit on the floor waiting to be mounted. Through the double green doors, the green and beige gym floor lined for various games reflected crisp and clean in the bright lighting. As the rest of the classes streamed in, “Oooo,” “Cool,” and “Wow” filled the space.

I gestured for the Grade Twos to sit as Mrs. Avery gathered everyone’s attention, “Welcome to your new Gym!” Everyone cheered and some clapped. “To honour this celebration Rick and Terri Johnston are here to put on a special concert for you.”

Jane turns down the lights so only the stage is illumined. The retractable stage flashed with lights and decorations as Rick and Terri played. Rick and Terri are well known children’s entertainers in the area. Their presence is particularly poignant because of

58 Anne felt comfortable with our ‘researcher-researched’ relationship to instruct me about next steps. Perhaps this would be an appropriate extension for this research project. Perhaps creating a student developed video would allow student voices to tell what they gym meant to them.
Rick’s role in working to make the gym possible and his long-standing advocacy for the school. To say that when we walked into that place it was emotional would be an understatement. The students were overjoyed as they explored each corner with their eyes. A few parents and teachers stood along the wall whispering and watching the children’s reactions to the space and the music. The Parent Council members and some staff were teary, overwhelmed at seeing all of their work come to fruition. For one Grade Three boy the excitement was too much; he anxiously peered through the window in the door.

The local newspaper flashed pictures and interviewed Jane, and some of the Parent Council members. Anne said, “A gym seems like such a simple thing, but when you don’t have one it becomes an obstacle. This really makes life better for the kids, and that’s all we really want isn’t it?”

Rick and Terri played songs that the kids could sing along and dance to, at one point the whole school danced the locomotion. We continued to celebrate until the recess bell rang.

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Construction of the gym seems like a simple thing that brought a group of parents, students, teachers, community organizations, businesses, and some member of a school board together. The gym provided a space large enough
for all of them to be in one room together, to see each other, to come to know each other as a community, to celebrate each other, their work, and their common purpose: to make life better for these kids. The gym allowed them to see themselves from a great distance and up close.
Chapter 6. Reaching out in the Community

10:30 am

These mid-November days in Southern Ontario it is mild and rainy much later in the season than usual. Usually by this time of year the ground is frozen and we have had the first sightings of snow. The weather report calls for snow later by the end of the week.

There are perhaps one hundred students on the yard, while the other have left school for the lunch hour. A few juniors swing on the swing-set wary of the moment when the bell will ring signalling the second half of recess. It is at that point that the primaries get their turn on the equipment. A circle of older girls whisper stories and secrets; some have linked arms, some lean against the school wall, some shift back and forth uneasily. Five Educational Assistants roam the yard, aiding designated students in engaging with others through games like tether ball. They model school yard social norms. One blonde Grade Six girl wearing a Peer Mediator vest works out a sand pile squabble between two Grade One students. To any outsider it looks like an average day on the school yard, but looking closer I notice something different. There is excitement on the yard because of
the gym, many students are talking about the space — what they saw, what they heard, what they liked, what they looked forward to. Some students are more satisfied to reclaim their yard and rolling on the new sodden grass where the construction fence separated the students from the build-site. This building built a community both within the school and within the community at large. I have become part of that community and I will miss this school when it is time for me to leave.

A Conversation with Penny

A year and a half after that first September morning, in 2007, I continue my search to understand the stories and the transformation at King Albert Public School.

The snow swirls around outside the window of Penny’s office. She is the Executive Director at the United Way. Across the street I can see one of the Social Housing Complexes and a few children dancing and playing in the freshly fallen snow. Throughout the conversations with members of the school community who collaborated with me, they made clear the importance of knowing the students and knowing the community, more than simply understanding the details of a child’s life. They felt it was more essential to have honest relationships with students; ones that showed adults care, and that these connections be non-judgemental. Before discussing King Albert, Penny shared some thoughts on the community, the city, and the work that needs to be
done, and why she is involved in it. It is conversations like this where I understand she gets it!

“In 1982, while fundraising for the Boys and Girls Club, I visited a house on Durham Street and I fell through the porch it was so rotten. The college students who were living in the house came rushing out and lifted me up out of the hole in the front porch. They said, ‘You’re supposed to use the board.’ I said ‘I wasn’t walking on it because I thought it was a board for repair.’ They said, ‘No, you have to walk on it.’ I was a reporter at the time and I went back to work and asked, ‘Do you know what the conditions are like? Why aren’t we doing anything?’ Part of it was there were loopholes. I found that appalling. Back then, without me even knowing it, I was meant to be doing something like this….”59

“My role as Executive Director is a different role than it was five or six years ago. Three and a half years ago we were involved in a very intensive community engagement process called Community Matters.60 It was a three-year study and interaction where we asked groups of people, from every nook and corner in the City of Kawartha Lakes, about their hopes and visions for their tiny villages and hamlets; and about the concerns they had and challenges

59 Within adult education, transformative learning theory states that through some event, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. “If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she see things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out the world”(Cranton, 2002, p. 64).

60 In August of 2005 United Way began working on the Community Matters Project. Community Matters was a collaboration project with 16 United Ways across Ontario. It was a two and a half year project funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation.
they faced. We tried to visit and hear from my different types of people. We found a lot of information.

“Every single community thought they were different than the next community but when it was all out in the wash—transportation, isolation, lack of economic development, housing shortages, poor housing conditions, and youth engagement were all priorities each community identified. Issues of poverty greatly affected the lives of the families in the City of Kawartha Lakes. The fact that people drive three hours a day because there is no work here for them or the fact that people knit three and four jobs together in order to make ends meet was telling of the need.

“So, when we finished our Community Matters Project, we met with other Ontario United Ways to discuss our top five issues. That was very useful to us, because United Way had never worked as a movement in Ontario. Each United Way was autonomous and worked independently on our respective community issues. United Way in Canada began almost one hundred years ago but there was a feeling amongst many of us that poverty was growing. We have never taken on poverty, housing and systemic issues. So, some of us decided that we needed to work as a movement and look at how we can work collectively across the country. It makes much more sense to coordinate everyone’s efforts to reduce poverty, to make housing better for all age groups, and to put in safeguards for any citizen that is fragile and at risk.”

“Unity within the movement allowed for knowledge to be shared and greater work to be accomplished. Similar to the work that has been
accomplished at King Albert – instead of working individually on good projects they began to work together for one goal. When staff, students, parents, and community began opening their doors and worked together, the needs of the students were better met, the teachers felt more supported in their practice and parents became engaged,” 61 I said.

“There is a misnomer held by many people who choose not to give to United Way — they think that it is just for poor people. It is not. The reality is that ninety percent of Canadians will access a United Way funded agency in their lifetime and it crosses every demographic.

“After, the United Way did strategic planning based on what we learned, our priority became youth. We wanted more information to back up what we were hearing from the youth side in the Community Matters. So kids went out and interviewed three peers to asked them what were the top three issues they dealt with every day. They told us the things that we had been hearing: Poverty, drugs, bullying. We followed up and had open conversations with these kids afterwards.

“We found that many of them were accessing breakfast programs. The Salvation Army saw an increase in kids at lunch — they created a hot lunch program just for kids. Now agencies are stepping forward to address that need by creating soup kitchens just for kids. That’s alarming. If we hadn’t had such

61 Greater work could be done by the group than individually. Paulo Freire (1970, 2007) writes, “Whereas in the antidialogical theory of action the dominators are compelled by necessity to divide the oppressed, the more easily to preserve the state of oppression, in the dialogical theory the leaders must dedicate themselves to an untiring effort for unity among the oppressed — and unity of the leaders with the oppressed — in order to achieve liberation” (p. 172).
an open kind of dialogue with our community, I don’t know if we would be having this type of communication.

“King Albert is sort of in the middle of this because we have known for a very long time that it is a very poor school catchment. It wasn’t at one time. It was actually quite an affluent part of the town with big beautiful homes, built at the turn of the century, housing professionals in that corridor of Glenelg and Melbourne Streets and all the way over to the river. What has happened, which often does in downtown areas, is that the space became rundown and poverty stricken — large century homes were divided into rental units, apartments above shops were rented out. So instead of one family, you have multiple small families or one-parent families living in often unsafe conditions.

“Can you tell me about some of the conditions that you heard about and how you heard about them?” I asked.

“Through our study and we heard about situations through collective dialogue with the other community interest groups and organizations, like A Place Called Home, who are experts in these areas. At meetings, there were fortunately people from the city, representatives from Social Housing.

“It’s pretty appalling. Dirt floors. We have dirt floors in homes here. We knew that because Service Clubs go into homes and deliver the Christmas Stocking fund. Some of this is because structures might have originally been old cottages, hunt camps, or building starts and then are not completed because people have run out of capital. We also heard about the disrepair from Social

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62 A Place Called Home is a charitable, non-profit organization providing a 19-bed shelter for single adults, couples, and families since 1995.
Housing groups. Many of the facilities were old and in need of repair, issues like mould and high utility bills because the windows were old. It was appalling…the fact that people who were on Social Assistance couldn’t afford to live in Social Assistance Housing because utilities were extra. We also knew about renovated homes, or not renovated, just split into duplexes and triplexes. We heard about unsafe living conditions, like electrical arcing in houses, or lack of smoke detectors.

“If tenants live in basement apartments or in an attic, there is often no fire escape, or not an adequate one. On Glenelg Street in the 1990s, there was a horrible house fire. It was a big, beautiful old house divided into apartments and three or four Fleming College kids, I believe, burned to death. I think that was a wake-up call for the City. They put things on the books, but it’s very hard to regulate….

“In the 1990s, a number of people moved here from Oshawa or Toronto thinking they could save money. But what they didn’t reckon on was the isolation and transportation difficulties or the high cost of utilities.

63 I spoke with Bill Huskinson, a firefighter and first to respond to the century home full of Sir Sanford Fleming College students. When he arrived the fire had engulfed the main and second floors, but heard screams from the attic, where there was not an adequate fire escape. He said it was the most disastrous fire he has seen in his life. He explained that a lack of affordable housing in Lindsay resulted in people living in homes that are less than ideal. The Poverty Coalition is lobbying the municipal before the next election to consider a poverty action plan for the City of Kawartha Lakes (personal communication, June 2010).

64 Rural communities have transformed because transportation and communication technologies rapidly advance. Rural communities become spatially larger and more sustainable through the development of improved transportation systems, the Internet, and through increased access to consumer goods and services in rural service centre magnet villages, like Lindsay. Because of this access to consumer goods and service, rural communities become similar to urban centers, thus making them more attractive as places to live. “These transformations appear to create conditions which make members of this community, particularly men, less mobile than was the case in previous decades because access to urban
“A few years ago, the city finally started including utilities in Social Housing Complexes. They put a good deal of money into renovating many of the places with upgrades such as windows. Now that the city is footing the bill they’re more conscientious about efficiency.

“Another thing that I see with kids who are living in poverty is that they move frequently because of financial conditions and family conditions. Attempting to be ‘one step ahead of the Sheriff,’ families would move out in the middle of the night. The kids never have a consistent school.

“So, the area around King Albert has slowly changed, and now we have some of the very poorest people attending that school and living in the area.

“I heard from people who live at Red Pine⁶⁵, that many chose to take their kids out of the school that they should be going to because they felt they were being discriminated against by staff and other people. I also heard that tone and inflection from some of the educators in another school, and it used to bother me immensely.

“Can you tell me more about your conversations and experiences with people in that community?”

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⁶⁵ Red Pine Estates is part of Social Housing provided in the City of Kawartha Lakes.
“A few years ago, the Ontario Early Years took some of their programs to a few of the Social Housing settings. Some were successful, most weren’t. They were fortunate to have a staff member that lives at Red Pine.

“Conditions in the neighbourhood weren’t great. It was frightening for parents with kids. There were drug dealers and...very stereotypical kinds of things, unfortunately. The little playground was old and needed maintenance. Undaunted, Ontario Early Years started their program outside, which ran once a week in the good months, as there are no meeting rooms. I heard about this and was really encouraged and curious. So, I went and sat and talked with people under the trees. I asked them what were the issues they were dealing with on a daily basis? What changes did they want to see in their community? I made it clear that I wasn’t coming to tell them that ‘this and this’ needed to be done to make their neighbourhood better, but if they wanted help in how to identify or to take on some of the challenges than I was quite willing to help them. I went back, several times to talk and ask questions: ‘What would you like? What would make your life better here?’

“And they talked and talked. They talked about practical things — like garbage; and their hopes — like a better playground. ‘We’ve have kids with

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66 The Ontario Early Years are located across the province with local agencies leading the programs for each riding so there’s always a local flavour. They are funded by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services for the Province of Ontario, Canada, and a United Way member agency. It is a place where parents, grandparents, or caregivers can stay and play with children new born to six years old.

67 Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1995) write, “In this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing” (p. 379).
special needs, they can’t use this playground.’ ‘We need a different kind of basin because the cats are using it.’

“So we talked about how they could tackle their garbage issues. It was a matter of everyone committing to working together to pile it in one area, and then having the Housing Authority pick it up. After that they began thinking, “Okay, we can now control this. We’re in charge of this.”

I talked with the parents about Good Food Boxes. I talked with them about breakfast programs. I talked with them about the Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and other agencies. It was interesting; you have to listen carefully. Many of the parents said they had been on the Big Brothers/Big Sisters list for a long time, that there were not enough spots and that no one wanted to be with their kids. Then I talked about the Big Bunch Program in schools, and they said, “if you go to this school, then that just gives the teachers more fodder to tell us how poor our kids are and that we are not doing a good job.” I listened to some of the other struggles, and I said, ‘Okay,

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68 The idea of “ask the community what their needs are, they are the experts,” in narrative research is a given and seems like common sense but many people attempting to do human work enter the relationship with the notion that they are the expert who can bring some much needed knowledge to the community of interest. This idea became particularly problematic for researcher Dorothy Smith. She wished to shift the power of the researcher and align herself with the community members. “Smith used the word sisterhood as a way of speaking about the method of researching she was developing. This method required relocation of the knower — moving from being an outsider in hearing of women’s lives and troubles to “locating yourself on their side and in their position” (Smith, 1977, p. 15).

69 Through the Health for Life: Taking Action for Healthy Living, volunteers locally pack fresh fruits, vegetables, and “Smart Shopper” recipe flyers in the Good Food Boxes each month. The boxes are either delivered to isolated communities in the City of Kawartha Lakes or pick up by residents.

70 There are many unsubstantiated stereotypes of communities, families, and students affected by poverty. When these assumptions are made it is, “a deficit conceptualization of students and communities. Do we look at children and see what is there, or do we look at children and see
you don’t want to do breakfast programs because that’s going to peg you in a hole. What about getting Good Food Boxes?’ So we brainstormed. The momentum kept growing.

“At the same time that I’m talking to the parents, I’m talking to the kids. ‘What do you kids want to see?’ They wanted a pool hall and a basketball court. They need something else to do because they have a group of kids that are past the playground stage.

“I said, ‘you’ve got the power to do this, you know.’ I used to teach writing workshops in schools, and I told them that all the power they needed was in this — a pen. They told me I was crazy. I said, ‘I’m telling you the power is here. That’s what Presidents sign peace or war with. You need to get yourselves together and make it happen.’

“With the help of a Social Worker, these kids met once a month. They just loved the power of meeting. The power of telling their parents that they can attend, but they can only speak if they are on the agenda. One of them

what’s missing?” (Flessa, 2007). Through the Rural Women Take Action on Poverty group interviews and community arts-informed research project, one participant said:

We [people living in poverty] should not all be painted with the same brush. People assume we take advantage of the government and that really hurts because it is so difficult to get help. I had to have nothing before I could get help. To assume we are all drunks, and that we smoke it away, that we go partying and we don’t feed our kids…it’s very wrong. I wish people would ask me instead of making assumptions, (Purdon, 2009, p. 53).

For this woman and many that Penny spoke with, being heard and listened to without judgment was of utmost importance.

71 “So it’s a matter of breaking the cycle.... There are too many problems we face. We have to break the cycle, and the way to break the cycle for us is to do something that is doable, is to do something that is cheap, do something that is within our power, our capacity, our resources.” (Wangari Maathai, Noble Peace Prize Winner, 2004)

72 “Empowerment implies contributing to the shaping of society, rather than being subjected to the power of others. It goes beyond critical thought and includes a readiness to act with others to bring about the social conditions that one has chosen through a process of collaborative, critical inquiry. Action requires courage…” (Berlak & Berlak, 1987, p. 170 in Morgan & Saxton, 1994).
borrowed a laptop, and they felt quite official, taking minutes. It has empowered these kids.\textsuperscript{73}

“We had a meeting when it looked like there was no money coming through because the quotes had come in too high. But these kids didn’t give up. I told them to write me a heartfelt letter, to sign all their names to it, and to be able to present if I got a group together. So, I called the Boys and Girls Club, the Police Services, the Optimus Club. These groups, and all the housing reps, came to the meeting. And I told my story.\textsuperscript{74} I spoke about these kids, how wonderful they are and about their collaboration. I told them about how the parents are really working and participating and getting behind their kids. They are learning through this self-governance piece that what their kids are doing is positive. They feel now that they have power to make change. The parents are proud of their kids. Now the families work together in Red Pine.

“The good thing out of all this is that these kids got their basketball court. On the day we had the basketball court opening we had Social Service folks come out and do a barbecue. We must have had about sixty people out, and that was grandparents, aunts, and uncles who don’t live there, but came because their kids were going to make speeches to politicians and community groups. They understood the importance. Every household got a basketball. So they got the tools too. They just didn’t get a facility. We had a commitment from a high school Physical Education teacher to come and do a workshop to

\textsuperscript{73} This type of empowerment work is happening at school and at home, through the United Way and the people associated with King Albert.

\textsuperscript{74} Thomas King (2003) writes, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are…. For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world” (pp. 2, 10).
teach the kids basketball skills. Also, to teach the kids ways to look after their equipment and the court.

“This was pivotal: I had a young mother come up to me afterwards and say, ‘I think I am going to go back to school and be a Youth Worker.’ She had helped take the minutes and helped these kids with this governance piece. She said, ‘Do you think I can do it?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I think you can do it. I think you would be great at it. I will write you a letter. Whatever else you need, you let me know.’ And that’s one project!

“So, you can see the commitment. These are good parents – just poor in relation to dollars. Some of them haven’t had great mentoring but they are trying with their kids.

“So some of the parents chose not to send their kids to the school that they were attending, and I think now they feel that they can choose schools that are more accepting of kids who live in poverty. We have St. Mary’s Elementary School and King Albert in this town.

“I think that because most of the kids that go there are poor, a lot of them know one another and may have grown up together. There’s already a sense of a closed community when you live in poverty in an impoverished neighbourhood. It’s the same people you see at Social Services when you are up there negotiating for money. It’s the same people you see if you’re going to a used clothing store. So, they have their community and they feel safe in it. I mean, we should all feel safe in our communities and have a comfort level.
“You know that mother came to me — she was having some
difficulties in her life last week, and she felt comfortable enough to tell me
about it. Building trust is the key, and that is what King Albert has done with
parents. They have had caring principals – not that all principals aren’t caring –
but King Albert has just outstanding principals and outstanding staff. There is
burnout because it’s hard, hard work. Just like we are, they just intuitively
work on building community.

“So, I took what we’ve been learning with our experiences at Red Pine
and the wisdom from the Ontario Early Years to actually go in to places, and I
thought, ‘Okay, maybe we need to take our services into King Albert Public
School. Maybe that’s the way we can support them,’ but I think, ‘Well, what
am I supposed to do about it? I’m just one person. I’m not an expert.’ I’m
reading all I can read. I’m trying to learn about community building.”

“I have also felt frozen in place when presented with an uncomfortable
issue, especially around issues of race, class, and gender. I have questioned
what possible impact can I have on a situation that seems so enormous? But
this time of reflection has often led me to action. Often I find myself
researching and accessing resources to gain a deeper understanding or engaging
with an expert on the topic,” I say.

“All of those lessons that we are learning we are applying to King
Albert. We know that if we take the services in there, the parents are more

75 Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994) refer to this process as reflection, which moves to
conscientization, then action. Cole and Knowles (2001, 2008) view the learning process and
increasingly enriched by each new experience, thus the cyclical process spirals upward building
from previous experience.
likely to use them and feel safe because it’s in their school.\textsuperscript{76} I sense that those parents who are more difficult to engage with their kids aren’t likely going to do something after school because it might cost money, or they don’t want to be identified as poor, or they just can’t, quite frankly, be bothered. There are some parents like that. I had sat on it long enough and I thought, ‘okay I guess I better really try and do something,’\textsuperscript{77} so I called a meeting with four or five agencies and the King Albert Principal and we just brainstormed.

“I said to the principal, ‘Are you willing to accommodate us if we bring the services into the school? These agencies are extending their services and will be doing lots of leg work on very limited resources. We don’t want to step over boundaries, so we need to plan and discuss implementation.’\textsuperscript{78} At the end

\begin{itemize}
\item Imagine schools as the beating heart of our communities…. As education is the cornerstone of democratic society, schools are the heart of the community. This demands meaningful community participation and access. Active partnerships with parents, youth, community groups, agencies, and supporting organizations are essential to healthy school communities…. Inclusive culture, achieving fairness and equity…. A commitment to share successful practices…. High educational expectations — honouring the achievements, and learning styles…. Imagine teaching that is not limited to the classroom but is embodied in every aspect of the school experience” (Goldman & Kugler, 2005, pp. 1, 3).
\item Paulo Freire calls this reflection which moves one action praxis. He writes, “…the reflection and action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation” (2007 p. 100).
\item Penny’s experiences also follow the cycle of experiential learning as defined by Kolb. An experience or practice often requires a person to gather information, which provides the basis for reflection, analysis, and formulation of personal theories which provokes informed action (Kolb, 1984, p. 68).
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{76} “Imagine schools as the beating heart of our communities…. As education is the cornerstone of democratic society, schools are the heart of the community. This demands meaningful community participation and access. Active partnerships with parents, youth, community groups, agencies, and supporting organizations are essential to healthy school communities…. Inclusive culture, achieving fairness and equity…. A commitment to share successful practices…. High educational expectations — honouring the achievements, and learning styles…. Imagine teaching that is not limited to the classroom but is embodied in every aspect of the school experience” (Goldman & Kugler, 2005, pp. 1, 3).

\textsuperscript{77} Paulo Freire calls this reflection which moves one action praxis. He writes, “…the reflection and action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation” (2007 p. 100).

\textsuperscript{78} Rigsby, Reynolds, and Wang (1995) write about the many researchers and advocates who argue that collaborative school-community partnerships can bridge gaps between schools and communities, and provide resources to better serve children and families. Though these
of three hours we had commitment for programs. It was a good education for Greg\(^79\) because he heard what the agencies do, fully, and that everybody is willing to stretch their very limited resources to work together at King Albert. We started brainstorming about the things we could do.

“At one point, I said, ‘You know what, we have to be very careful.’ I told them I learned this from Lorrie Polito,\(^80\) who said, ‘Just because someone is poor, we don’t have the right to go in and fix them. They are not broken.’\(^81\) It stuck with me. It was good advice. So I said, ‘If we are going to do dinner, we’re just going to do dinner. And we only go in there if we are invited.’

“So we further brainstormed and decided to have a spaghetti dinner, which was successful. One hundred people came out in the first wave. The night had the right atmosphere. So the spaghetti dinner was a high, and we’ll have to commit to maybe two or three of those a year. But the nice thing is, the parents have seen us do it and eventually, I think they will do it. They’ll get parent and kid volunteers.

“Afterwards, Jude Tripp\(^82\) sent me an e-mail that said, ‘You had some of the most hard to reach families out at that event. I don’t know how you did it, but you did it.’ It really wasn’t me, it was just the right people at the table. Jude knows some of these families, but it’s hard to get them to go to the Centre.

\(^79\) Greg, current principal at King Albert Public School.
\(^80\) Lorrie Polito is the director of *A Place Called Home* Shelter and support service.
\(^81\) Joseph Flessa refers to this as removing deficit thinking (Flessa, 2007).
\(^82\) Jude Tripp is the Executive Director at the Ontario Early Years Centre.
But now they have this trust, because they see we invested into their neighbourhood. The Red Pine folks called them and asked, ‘Can we have our Christmas event at the Centre?’ They wouldn’t have done that before. The Early Years Centre people would invite them for Christmas, and they have never come. Parents didn’t want their families to be judged as ‘look at those poor kids.’ They feel comfortable enough to say that to me. I feel very humbled that they feel that way. I tried to be a keen listener and follow their leads. So, this is a very slow long term work. I don’t know what is right to do, and I don’t know what is wrong. I just know that we have to be guided.83

“I haven’t been going to the King Albert Parent Council meetings, because I’m really trying to work on work/life balance.84 I’ve been declining extra meetings because I’m involved in a lot of things. I’m at work a lot. But, I need to have my face at that table because I think it’s a trust thing to build, and I think it makes connections.

“I’m not sure teachers who are new to King Albert know what they’re in for. I’m sure they’ve heard stories. I think the current principal was feeling extremely frustrated and desperate for these kids. When he saw how many

83 In Belonging: a culture of place, bell hooks (2009) analyzes the importance of creating a “community of care” so that our relationships with one another can be ‘governed by conviviality rather than suspicion, by praise rather than blame’… ‘As we work with others, and as we endeavor to get to know them, we learn to appreciate them in their depth and integrity and with a better appreciation for their potential and need. We see them for the unique creatures they are and begin to approach the complexity, beauty and mystery of every created thing and person. The loveliness of who they are starts to dawn on us, calling forth within us a response of love and celebration’”(p. 228-229).

84 As Leithwood (2006) and Flessa (2010) indicate increased volunteer work from a few within communities in challenging circumstances is neither sustainable nor feasible. Leadership and tasks must be divide and member within the community must work together for change.
were hungry at lunch, that was very upsetting for him. He was brave enough to send a letter to the Poverty Coalition saying, ‘I’m really worried about these kids. We’ve got to do something. You just don’t know what they are living in.’ We were able to say, ‘Yes, we do know what they are living in. We know that in one house when a lady flushes the toilet, feces runs down into her living room. She’s got three babies. We know that we have slum property owners and we feel that council either cannot do anything because of processes, lack of knowing what is happening, and yes in some conditions follow up on property standards. Legal aid lawyers shared that by-law officers or fire inspector go into these places, write out fines, but some of the landlords (and not all because there are many who try to keep safe places) pay the fines and then get rid of the tenants who might have complained and start all over again with new tenants — and the same issues. We are working with the Legal Clinic group to assist them in setting up workshops in vulnerable neighbourhoods. These dedicated professionals want to change conditions by educating property owners and teaching tenants about their rights — this is a positive step and we are fortunate to have such a team here.

“They’ve had some interesting and good principals there. But most of the principals at King Albert have been compassionate…and more accepting. King Albert has had principals who understand work at a grassroots level; not from the top down.

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85 An example of the hidden poverty within Canada.
“I’m sure there is a level of frustration. I hear people saying, ‘Why can’t poor people just move to a nicer place.’ Or, ‘Why can’t they be better parents.’ There is an assumption that poor people aren’t good parents, that single mothers and fathers aren’t. But we never see politicians standing up and going, ‘I’m going to run on poverty!’ ‘I’m going to run on housing!’ They all run on an industrial basis. But they need to be running on planning, good urban planning. They need to be running on poverty.

“Big Brothers and Big Sisters have high statistics and an excellent record [of success stories]. Kids who are mentored who live in Social Housing are more likely not to be in Social Housing when they grow up. Kids who are mentored are less likely to use drugs and be in trouble with the law, and are less likely to use violence to resolve differences. For the life of me, I can’t understand why teachers and school boards aren’t clamouring all over and throwing money at us. I don’t get it. We make their job easier by funding these agencies. Parents can go to work because we have ‘before- and after-school care.’ They couldn’t hold their jobs if they couldn’t put their kids somewhere so they could get to work on time.

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86 When discussing rural women’s poverty, Arts-based community researcher, Colleen Purdon stated:

When we see poverty as [an] individual problem we ask, “why are you poor?” and expect simple solutions (get a job, get a husband, get off your butt, move somewhere else). If we see poverty as a community problem, we ask: “why is there poverty?” and the answers are complex and require broad social change. If we fail to ask “why is there poverty?” community strategies don’t happen. If rural communities don’t have comprehensive strategies, effective community partnerships, or coordinated efforts to address poverty, it could well be that they are asking the wrong questions (Purdon, 2009, p. 15).
“Laurie Scott\textsuperscript{87} described us one time in a meeting as being, ‘the social safety net’ for our community, and I think that is true. So, now that I’ve kind of adopted King Albert. My goal is to make sure, and I’m not sure how I’m going to do this, but I want this neighbourhood to have a safety net around it.\textsuperscript{88} So that means I need to be more engaged with Social Services and ensure we have a social worker who stays on staff for this goal.

“I’ve listened to some of the folks who are running programs in Toronto. We’ve had some interesting speakers from United Way Ontario from the Poverty by Postal Code\textsuperscript{89} talking about the work they are doing with the kids, the schools and the agencies, and the hope they have for their communities. That is what we have to do here. I’m not sure that people really understand the impact of United Way here. You can say it repeatedly, but we just need more Ambassadors out there saying that for us. And people say, ‘I had no idea.’ Or, ‘Shouldn’t that be the government’s job.’ That’s my favourite line. ‘Well, yes, it should. But they haven’t done it for the last hundred years, so I just thought we’d do it…’

“I heard this excellent speaker, and I use his phrase a lot, ‘make hope real.’ At King Albert we’re in it for the long haul. I’m just not sure what the

\textsuperscript{87} Laurie Scott was a member of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario representing Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock for the Progressive Conservative Party from 2003-2009.

\textsuperscript{88} I believe the way in which children learn and what they need in order to find success is intertwined with the society they are raised in and how well it supports them. Community plays a central role in the education and development of children, but this is underemphasized in current teacher training.

\textsuperscript{89} Poverty by Postal Code is a research study of the geographic concentration of family poverty in the City of Toronto over the past two decades. It was undertaken as part of United Way’s ongoing research into social issues, and to help determine its funding priorities. (United Way of Greater Toronto and The Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004).
journey is, I just know that as long as I’m at the helm here, I’m willing to take it.”

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After talking with Penny I felt hopeful. I left thinking about how stories influences me, about my own stories and, in particular, stories about charity and judgments and grace. I thought about grassroots community development and I thought about the work and teachings of Paulo Freire. I thought about hunches, following your instincts and the power of hope. I thought about journeys, about the way life flows and, in a way, it directs.

I once read a story in a memoir that has always stayed with me:

Enlightenment came in an unexpected place: a grocery store…. While standing in line at the checkout counter, the lady in front of me pulled out food stamps to pay for her groceries. I had never seen food stamps before. They were more colorful than I imagined and looked more like money stamps. It was obvious as she unfolded the currency that she, I, and the checkout girl were quite uncomfortable with the interaction. I wished there was something I could do. I wished I could pay for her groceries myself, but to do so would have been to cause a greater scene. The checkout girl quickly performed her job, signing and verifying a few documents, and then filed the lady through the line. The woman never lifted her head as she organized her bags of groceries and set them into her cart. She walked away from the checkout stand in the sort of stiff movements a person uses when they know they are being watched.

On the drive over the mountain that afternoon, I realized that it was not the woman who should be pitied, it was me. Somehow I had come to believe that because a person is in need, they are candidates for sympathy, not just charity. It was not that I wanted to buy her groceries, the government was already doing that. I wanted to buy her dignity. And yet, by judging her, I was the one taking her dignity away. I love to give charity, but I don't want to be charity. This is why I have so much trouble with grace. (Miller, 2003, p. 83)

After I read that, the next time I was in the grocery store, I wondered what it would be like to use food stamps. I wondered more about conclusions
we make based on limited information. Ahead of me in the line were three boys in their early twenties wearing rugby jerseys. They carry individually wrapped fruity cereals, frozen pizzas, wings, chips, and mix in their cart. As they jostled each other in line, I smiled and organized the items in my cart. I realized the woman behind me in line was staring at me. I became acutely aware of the items I had chosen and the outfit I was wearing. I wondered what the conclusions the woman behind me in line made about my choices. Did she make judgments about who I am and the things I value based on what I have purchased and the way I am dressed? I wondered what the woman would think if I used food stamps to pay. I would want to justify why I was buying frozen pizza, I’m very busy I would say, sometimes I just like to have a few meals that are easy. I wonder about that the judgments I have made in the past that I now understand differently. I thought about various stigmas and all the judgments made and still being made about King Albert.

I reflect back on the words of Ben Okri, “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” (p. 153 in King, 2003).

In a review of literature on poverty and education Joseph Flessa (2007, p. 3) writes, “when we describe what is or should be ‘different’ about schooling for children affected by poverty, we are using an unstated point of
comparison, one that not only draws attention to inequalities but also might reinforce deficit conceptualizations of students and communities.” In other words, when teachers tell school stories and stories of school (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), are we seeing and telling what is there, or, are we looking at children and seeing what is missing? If by changing the stories we live by, do we change the teaching and learning experience at schools in challenging circumstances? Flessa (2007, p. 4) questioned how do we best “target educational interventions in schools for children experiencing poverty without simultaneously blaming students or their families for their poverty or finding them to be lacking in abilities?” This question is important to consider as these frameworks shape policy and practice. Though schools and communities have various roles in rearing and educating children, he urges that deficit framework thinking must be identified and overturned because this framework does not allow the stakeholders to conceptualize education as a “collective endeavour.”

One of the shifts that occurred during this transformation process at King Albert which helped the school function better was that the role of school and community was viewed as complementary and not opposing or dissentient. Flessa notes that in order for schools and communities to harmonize, educators cannot story communities and parents in terms of how they lack and how they fail: “When educators articulate a more comprehensive version of what it means to work with communities in poverty, we accomplish something quite significant: we take a stand against the sometimes overwhelming public
discourse that blames poor people for their poverty and that excuses unacceptable degrees of educational inequality” (p. 5).

I remember a conversation during my teacher preparation. We were discussing professional boundaries and the topic of hugging students came up. One of my classmates argued that, “Sometimes kids just need a hug. It isn’t about anything other than comforting.”

Another one of my classmates with a social justice and social work background said, “Sometimes students need much more than a hug. Sometimes it can be seen as patronizing or a ‘There, There, it’s going to be okay.’ You can’t guarantee that. There are systems and structures in place in society which keep people down. A hug isn’t going to cut it. It’s not enough to take the pain away.” She went on to speak about child abuse, structural poverty, and other injustices children in Canada face. Her words, “A hug isn’t going to cut it,” rang in my ears.

At the time I am not even sure I fully understood what she was talking about. But the short interaction came back to me while working at King Albert. What we are talking about is actually trying to meet a need, more than just the surface level. I am talking about structural changes.
Chapter 7. The School as Community Hub

A Further Conversation with Jane

The clouds hang low and thick, blanketing the sky in dark blues and greys. South of the school, beyond the fence, the tired century houses and the small war-time homes along Melbourne nestle into grassy foundations. I think again about my Grade Seven history teacher, Mr. Smith, who always said, “How will you know where you are going if you don’t know where you’ve been?” He believed that in living without knowledge of one’s history, each is doomed to repeat past mistakes. Without a sense of rootedness, youngsters will not be able to branch out and grow.

As part of her goals for the school, Jane attempted to make a record and to create continuity so that the students and staff may grow beyond the day to day actions and begin envisioning who they are and who they want to be as a part of the King Albert Public School team.

It was February, 2010. It was just over two years since the gym opened and I worked at King Albert. It was eight years since Jane began as principal. I sat with Jane in her office as she recalled more of her experience, “When I got to

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90 In January, 2005, the Trillium Lakelands District School Board signed a Community Use of Schools Agreement to receive $185,802 to help make school facilities more accessible to not-for-profit groups at reduced rates. Improvements made from this funding included: (a) Rental fees for not-for-profit groups serving children and youth were reduced to zero, (b) Hourly fees for school facilities such as classrooms and gyms were reduced to zero, (c) The hourly custodian fee that had been charged on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays was reduced for all community not-for-profit groups, (d) Single and multi-use administration fees were waived for all community not-for-profit groups, (e) Facilities were made available to community not-for-profit groups for an additional 5,000 hours a year. (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2006)
King Albert, they really didn’t have a logo. It was kind of like two torches in a triangular shape and nobody knew what it meant, and they didn’t have a spirit name for their sports team or anything like that. In the spring of my second year there, I was sick of the logo, so we surveyed the kids to try to decide what our school logo and name would be. I had a male Grade Six teacher who was running the contest and he thought that we should be the King Albert Cobras. I said, ‘We already have enough Cobras out there. We are King Albert, what about the Knights?’ There were a bunch of suggestions, so I said, ‘put that one in the contest too.’ And the King Albert Knights won the contest. So then, we put it out there for kids to draw the logo. We got several ideas for the logo.

“We took on the expression ‘sharing and caring.’” Then in the fall of my third year, we started working on ‘Mission Vision Values and Goals,’ because all of that fit in with coming up with a school motto and logo. So that was my big push that year, I would say.”

“Creating an identity?” I questioned to confirm.

“The School Vision Mission Statement was developed by the staff and then we took it to the School Council, and to students. That was a huge project that year. We also made a School Handbook, in which we wrote the Vision Mission Statement:

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91 The Grade Six class conducted a survey of all staff and students and Parent Council members which resulted in the decision to become the Knights.
92 Corbett (2009) wrote, “Rather than having to choose between particular fixed identity positions [Bourdieu (1984, 1990) and Williams (1958, 1961)] and then work out how to behave coherently within them, it seemed to me that identity construction was more powerfully understood in mobile terms. In other words, social actors can float in and out of identity positions and indeed the differential ability of some actors to achieve this identity flexibility or mobility is itself an important measure of power” (p. 3)
King Albert students, staff, and School Council are all members of a learning community working together to provide a safe and welcoming school environment; to provide a challenging curriculum which expands mind, body and character; to focus on student success; to support goal setting for lifelong learning. We recognize that one of our greatest strengths is our strong collaborative team approach to problem solving, delivery of program, extracurricular events, and establishing King Albert Public School as an inviting, dynamic, purposeful, and safe environment in which to learn.

From that came the motto ‘Sharing, Respect, Responsibility and Caring,’ and that’s what the logo represented. Responsibility for the world, Respect and Caring for one another.

“The logo was a huge thing. It was a Knight’s head with a feather, and then in the square body of the shield. We had no money, as usual. It took a long time to get the right combination. That was the year that School Council bought uniforms for our kids, because now we’re the Knights, and we have a logo and so now we get uniforms. They’d never had real sports uniforms before. I think that really raised school spirit and school morale. You really started feeling part of a community that had an identity and that identity was really good. The identity was established around this Vision of the school, instead of the vision of the school as this low socio-economic, needy school. We could feel really good about, and proud of, ourselves. That was the year that the School Council was really, really strong. I think the third year was all about building that Vision and building community, building an identity, and just trying to make us an idea in the community that would work.

“What was your process for creating the mission statement? How long did it take?” I asked.
“Developing this Mission Statement for King Albert was a three-month process. We spent one fall afternoon talking about it. ‘Okay, what is our Vision? What do we want to look like? What do we want our graduates to look like?’ I asked those questions, and then our mission is, ‘What does that look like? What is our purpose here? Why are we here working together?’ People struggled to articulate what that’s about.”

“Well, it is that reflexive piece. Often teaching feels like your racing — pushed, and pulled in different directions, swirling through the days just trying to keep your head above water. But it is situations like this if you step back from the water you can get your bearings and see the structure. The riverbed provides a strong foundation, the banks supports and cause the river to turn and twist. But there is always a direction — the creeks run into rivers which flow into lakes and on into the ocean. It is difficult to take the time to step back, many people stay in the action,” I said.

“It always amazes me that it’s such a difficult process to go through,” she pauses. “It was during my third year that we started working on getting the gym. One of the things that the Vision and Mission did was it established the feeling that we were worthy of a gym, and that it would be good for us as a

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93 Paulo Freire defines praxis as the act of reflection which leads to action, and again returns to reflections in a cyclical.
community. But you have to know that you’re a community before you know what you need, right?\footnote{Although the stated objective of many school-based parental engagement policies is to improve student achievement, parents of schoolchildren in Ontario are not a monolithic group with a single identifiable set of interests” (Flessa, 2007). Concepts such as unity, and organization can present a challenge for some principals as they risk potential conflicts between parents, or between parents and the school. I believe in shying away from conflict people lose the opportunity to learn from it. Ignoring conflict or diffusing conflict does not mean it does not exist; it is left under the surface and simply is not dealt with.}

“It was after Christmas, I think it was a January meeting that we knew that Alexandra\footnote{Alexandra Public School was built around the same time as King Albert, across town. It is very similar in structure, though every different in intake population.} was getting their gym. I told them to go once and see how the Board Meetings worked, just be observers. I was called to the Board Office the day after the delegation showed up to observe. ‘Did you know you had a parent delegation here at the Board meeting last night?’ I said, ‘Yes, I was aware of that. That was decided at a School Council Meeting that they would come.’ So, they went as a delegation to the next meeting, and so on, and before the end of that year, we knew we were getting the gym. So, it just took, again, two or three months once we knew who we were about, what we wanted, and what our goals were.

“Each year that I stayed, it got easier. In the office, I didn’t have the discipline problems, so you could really grow as a community and as a school. The students were growing and the level of trust with the parents was high.\footnote{Bryk and Schneider (2002) stated that trust is foundational for meaningful school improvement. Schools with high levels of trust between school professionals and parents, and among staff were three times more likely to improve in reading and mathematics than those schools with very low levels of trust. For further information on the impact of trusting relationships on contribute to a positive school climate, productive communication, increased student learning, teachers' collective sense of efficacy, and overall school effectiveness see Hoy & Sweetland, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000.} So it was really easy to get things done. I had those things that I wanted to see...
happen, and the playground was working and everything was working, and you just don’t want to leave when you get everything up and working. You don’t want to leave.”

“King Albert is definitely in my heart in a way that no other school will be because we made such significant change there. That needs to happen anywhere, but particularly there because people need to find their voice and to find that trust in the school system, I guess. Act less like a principal and more like a human being. That’s what you have to do, right?

“The last couple of years that I was there, good things happened at King Albert. There were good people at King Albert. They started to take on leadership roles in the community and in the school board. Anne is still the School District Chair. I found out that a parent on School Council and who worked at the movie theatre had his EA credentials; I got him in as an EA. Another father did all our media stuff, and was a volunteer for CKLY.97 And I said, ‘Why don’t you apply to work there?’ And now he works there. That was the kind of thing that you did. Our visibility increased in the community in a positive way. People would drop in and say, ‘I’d just like to commend this school. You have lots of people out on the yard.’ Who does that? People would stop in particularly after we put the games on the playground. We had people from other schools come in to see what we were doing.”

“Oh wow! That would have been quite the experience,” I said.

“Together you created this identity within the school which the outer

97 CKLY or Bob FM is a Canadian radio station, broadcasting at 91.9 MHz (FM) in Lindsay.
community notices. When there are good things happening in the sporting events with the kids in their uniforms, a pride is established within the student population. That transfers to the parents. With a little encouragement and respect, a Parent Council evolves, and then parents are out fundraising by decorating eggs, hosting the end of year Fun Fair at Victoria Park, participating in electives. People within Lindsay start to see a new side of King Albert. The newspapers are writing about sports events or fundraising instead of drug deals going on behind the portable. Someone sees you walking a string of kids down to the Academy Theatre or they hear about King Albert’s Christmas Concert at the churches, all the rumours of how terrible they were, shift when people actually see the student there. All the negative talk dilutes. Then King Albert’s face gets a big lift when the gym is built and opened. People in the town of Lindsay and at the board office saw what a little school with a lot of heart was all about.”

Jane continues, “When I decided we’d do the concerts at Bethel Church, how all that came about was kind of strange because the Minister would drop in and see me at the school and one of the School Council members actually ended up being the Secretary at the Church. I just felt that it was really important to take them into the Church at Christmas time. I came to King Albert in February, but at the Christmas concert before, a couple had actually gotten into a fist fight during the transition between the primary concert and the junior concert. I made the decision that based on that one fact alone: I would never have a concert in the mini-gym. That would not be happening.
“When we had the concert, there was something special about it. I can’t say that it’s anything spiritual, but I just think that coming into the walls of the church and doing the Christmas concert there, and everybody being together. We did the concert four times so people could come. But the last night we were packed in like rats, and that’s why I decided that we couldn’t do it a Bethel any more. Just bringing them into that church, I still feel it had some sort of effect. There was a feeling. It was celebratory, but there was something very magical about it all at the same. It just made you feel really, really good, and proud of your kids, and proud of their families. And the parents felt it too. They spoke to me about it. It just added a different tone, I guess. From then on, that whole feeling of caring just kept building.”

“I think the space was important. They got to know another one of the buildings that are in their neighbourhood,” I said.

“Yea, it’s within the block of the school. After that concert, a Bethel Mission women came at lunch time and ran the All-Star Reading program the following February. So that getting out into the community, and bringing the community in, is really important.

“It was also important to me that we came together as a whole school. I wanted the whole school because it feels like …” she pauses and her eyes became misty.

“Family?” I said.

98 They built a gym and, by doing so, built the community.
“Yeah. Everybody all together” she said.\textsuperscript{99}

“In the previous conversation, you used the word ‘family.’ That there was a great sense of family, like when you were talking about the Fun Fair, it was a ‘family feeling to the school’, and it’s not something that I’d heard before, in that context. I just wanted to ask you when you say ‘it feels like family,’ or ‘the school feels like family,’ or ‘this is your home.’ What do you mean by that?” I ask.

“I just took what I would do in the classroom. When I taught in the classroom, I would always say to them, ‘We’re like a family in school. We look after each other. If something happens to one of us on the playground, or if someone is picking on one of us, then we go and we help that person.’ I have a cooperative learning background. ‘We look after one another. We are happy for each other’s successes, and we are sad when something bad happens to the other person.’ So, it’s that caring aspect of looking after one another, and looking out for one another at the same time. Yeah, it’s very strong feeling. It

\textsuperscript{99} In Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (2003), bell hooks writes, “Just as the family is often a training ground for life in community, it is the place where we are first given a sense of the meaning and power of education. In Scott Sanders’ memoir \textit{Hunting for Hope} he reminds us: ‘Family is the first community that most of us know. When families fall apart, as they are doing now at an unprecedented rate, those who suffer through the breakup often lose faith not only in marriage but in every human bond. If compassion won’t reach across the dinner table, how can it reach across the globe…. Many of the young people who come to me wondering how to find hope are wary of committing themselves to anyone because they’ve already been wounded in battles…. I remain hopeful about community, because my own experience of family, in spite of strains, has been filled with grace.’ The crisis in families that Sanders describes has created an educational crisis” (p. 117).
it’s done in a very quiet way, you model that yourself, and then it has a trickle-down effect.\textsuperscript{100}

“I had the sense that that’s what you meant by it. That’s why I wanted to come back to it,” I said. “In my program, which is education and community development, the term ‘community’ gets thrown around quite often. It has great meaning to me, but it also loses its meaning because it’s…”

“It’s elusive,” she finishes.

I nod, “It’s used so regularly. But when you used the term ‘family,’ I have this very specific feeling about the care that you have for another person, that taking care of each other. I guess what I always get back to is that I think that who we are plays a big impact on how we are as teachers in the classroom, or as principals. I think some of the ways you grew up really impacted some of the things that you did at King Albert.”\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{100} In conversation with Jane later, she said that Parker J. Palmer [2004] said it best when he explained the power in a circle of trust to allow the soul to “emerge and speak its truth.” He states that the type of space needed is one designed by “principals and practices that honour the soul’s nature and needs. He describes the soul as being like a wild animal: "tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive hard places…Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance…Unfortunately, community in our culture too often means a group of people crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away” (p. 58). He describes a circle of trust as being a group of people who understand how to sit quietly: …in the woods’ and wait for the shy soul to show up. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are not filled with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person’s capacity to learn from it (p. 59).

\textsuperscript{101} Our lens or perspectives are based on people, places, and things we have encountered, this serves as a foundation for new experiences. I believe it is essential for me to understand the experiences which have informed my perspective in order to be prepared, experience new things and potentially shift my lens around knowledge, beliefs, and societal structures (Nicholls, 2010 p. 151).
“Having grown up in a small rural community has impacted my life. It defines who I am and how I deal with things. Growing up on a farm, attending a one-room school house, and working in rural school setting has impacted me….

“Today when I was driving here, I thought about family in that context. Someone said to me, ‘Oh, be careful, you’ve got a small car, you might get stuck in the deep snow,’ and I never thought about it. I never worry about that because this is my town and if I really needed something, then I know that you or someone else in my family is here to help me.”

**Thoughts about Identity, Family, and Community**

My sense of self and my identity grew stronger when I returned to Lindsay after being away for a time. I understood something I had known, but I understood in a new way. That is what learning is (Lessing, 1999). In a similar way, being a member of the King Albert community mattered less until people knew they were a part of something. It took people knowing they were a part of the community to develop King Albert’s identity. The community realized they were worthy of a gym, and their sense of unity allowed for greater work to be accomplished. Once the caring began it kept growing. Great things came of King Albert increasing its visibility within the community — both within the school and outside of the school. Anyone who has been a part of King Albert during the transformation will likely hold it in special regard because of the
significant change they made for the children. And the change they made for each other, the whole school all together, “the family.”
Chapter 8. Looking Back, Moving Forward

I heard a story once about a group of brothers who went into the back country to cut a timber to build a skid for their boat. In the middle of the tightly packed spruce grove they saw what they thought was the perfect tree. It was tall and straight and over thirty feet high. They notched it as they had been taught and then they sawed it completely through, and when they finished nothing happened. The tree’s upper branches were so densely intertwined with those of the trees around it that it just remained standing. There was no way it could be removed or fall unless the whole grove was cut down. It remained like that, each year the supporting trees extended their branches holding the tree tighter. One of the brothers said if you walked into the grove you would never realize that in its midst there was a tall, straight tree that was severed at its stump.\footnote{In No Great Mischief, Alistair MacLeod (1999) emphasises the importance of family connections, history, and rootedness within community. I have paraphrased his story.}
I offer these reflections as a window into the experiences that helped to develop my practice as an educator and illustrate the questions I asked myself during this research project. I hope others will ask themselves questions for the purposes of engaging with their practice — based on the context in which they teach.

Part of my process in writing was to continue to story the experiences from multiple perspectives. One of the outcomes, I hope, from this research project is that others will consider their own stories and the stories of the schools they are a part of, whether they are the ones they tell or the ones they keep secret. I hope that by reading about the difficult questions I struggled with, reflected upon, and what I came to understand that others may also reflexively ask the challenging questions.

By looking back and moving forward, these reflections are not conclusions, rather they are my cyclical experiential learning process. Or as Knowles, Cole and Presswood (2008, p. 10) describe, “learning is increasingly enriched by the experiential learning process (represented by the ‘upward’ spiralling movement).” I hope this research contributes to your cyclical, spiralling experiential learning process.

**Reflexive Process**

Life history inspired research, “is complex and consuming, exhilarating and elusive, demanding and defining, even tiring and tedious, but with understanding the lives of others comes the possibility of understanding oneself and one’s location in the world” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. viii). The process
of documenting the stories that surround the transformation that occurred at
King Albert Public School by the construction of a gymnasium over the last
decade has been a powerful way of unearthing much that I am as an educator.

Everything that we do is an expression of who we are; this is not limited
to inquiry or the research projects we develop. Remembering Knowles
suggestion, “we tend to research what it is that we need to know” (2008,
personal communication), in preparing this research project, I began with
myself. David Hunt (1987, p. 1) writes:

Your common sense ideas and your unexpressed theories, growing out
of your own personal experience, provide enormously rich sources of
knowledge about human affairs. But beginning with yourself, you are
taking advantage of this rich reservoir — tapping what you know about
yourself and others to bring out your experienced knowledge…

It is important to be aware of our perspectives or biases so that when we
encounter something new, we do not discredit it, fear it, or control it. We must
be aware in order to be prepared to change our mental constructs around
knowledge, beliefs, and societal structures. My experience at King Albert
Public School reinforced this need to understand self and locate myself within
the community.

To uncover ways that I orient myself in the world or assumptions I may
possess, I wrote narratives about my family, schooling, relationships, and my
experiences at King Albert Public School. This process helped me to see some
of the bias, beliefs, values, and hopes which inform my pedagogy. As part of
my research method process, I developed a personal history to understand my
perspectives. Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 52) write, “The more we understand
ourselves as researchers, the better able we are to listen to and understand others.” When I initially wrote my personal narratives, I did not think of the narratives as part of the King Albert Public School story until I realized I had been growing, developing, and perhaps even transforming during my time there.

**Structure**

Life history inquiry is not, centrally, about developing reductionist notions of lived experience in order to convey a particular meaning or ‘truth’ (be it truth or Truth). Rather, it is a representation of human experience that draws in viewers or readers to the interpretive process and invites them to make meaning and form judgments based on their own reading of the ‘text’ as it is viewed through the lenses of their own realities (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10).

I acknowledge that in attempting to document the collective narratives associated with KAPS, I am the writer, researcher, and inquirer. I developed this manuscript based on the transcripts from conversations with people who were part of the transformation which occurred at King Albert, and with those who wish to see it continue. I also wrote about my transformation which allowed me to refocus my own lenses.

I developed the stories based on hunches about the critical incidents that led to changes at this school, and largely based on how I experienced the community (both within and outside of King Albert Public School) as a

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103 “We express and represent elements of ourselves in every research situation. The questions we ask, the observations we make, the emotions we feel, the impressions we form, and the hunches we follow all reflect some part of who we are as person and researcher” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 89).
I edited and crafted participants’ stories to honour them. Initially, I found it challenging to find the balance between honouring each participant. I worried about misrepresenting peoples’ intentions. I wondered how to represent the transformation that occurred at the school through the lens of multiple stories and multiple perspectives. Upon completion of sections, participants reviewed their texts to ensure I portrayed the meaning they intended. They added or shifted words to create a clearer representation of their meaning. “Being reflexive in research means engaging in an ongoing process of reflecting ideas and experiences back on oneself as an explicit acknowledgement of one's locatedness in the research” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 42).

**Process**

The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to assist in the analysis and then development of the stories. I also accessed publicly available documents, such as school newsletters, videos of the gym construction and archived photographs from the early 1920s until present. Deciding to focus primarily on the transformation of the school and community became an integral part of the analysis process. Deciding to intertwine my learning transformation created a new depth in the process.

**Process-Structure**

As John Paul Lederach (2005) states, “If you stand high on a mountain, and look down at the river from a long distance what you see is the shape and

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104 “As learners we construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from our actions in the world” (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004, p. 60).
form it has carved in the land…. This is a process-structure. A river is dynamic, adaptive and changing while at the same time carving a structure with direction and purpose.” While I was teaching at King Albert I felt that I was changing and adapting to the dynamic purpose, however, (re)observing from a distance through completing this research project allows me to see the structure and understand it as both. For myself there have been many outcomes to this research which is both, a process and a structure.

**Moments of Reflexive Learning**

*About Teachers, School Boards, and Bachelor of Education Programs:*

Knowing that I felt largely unprepared for what I experienced at King Albert Public School, I asked one of the teacher participants, Darla, “If you were heading up a Bachelor of Education program, what do you think would be one of the most important things to have teachers understand, the most important thing to have them learn about? When and how in their learning process should this learning take place.”

She replied, “I think there are teachers and there are principals in this Board that have never prepared for a school like this. They have no idea what it’s like here. So I think that I would recommend that one of the placements be in a school where there is a high level of poverty. It will change how you see things. It changes your priorities. It changes issues. The things that are trivial which some people blow totally out of proportion seem insignificant when you think about what some of these kids have dealt with; things you hope that you
or your family never have to deal with. So, I would definitely encourage them to have a placement, or a conversation with somebody that works in a school with high levels of poverty."

“What would you say to the teacher candidates if you were having a conversation with them?” I ask.

“I would say to teachers who are beginning — ‘know your community.’ I would stress that when you are teaching teachers, ‘Choose your words carefully, because you might be saying something that can really offend somebody, or hurt their feelings. You have to be totally aware.’”

“I know what you are saying. I was at ETFO’s Poverty and Education Symposium and one teacher’s reflexive comment, stands out in my mind as a critical moment in my teaching practice. I saw a group of educators and activists who were working hard to understand how the education system could better benefit the students at their schools. I heard one teacher describing a lesson she had taken from a professional development session. She explained to the audience, ‘I regularly told my students that if they study hard and finish

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105 Knowles, Cole, and Presswood (2008) write, “You are not destined to be a teacher in a classroom. The success of schools and the degree of students’ learning are not just dependent on the work of teachers in classrooms; schools represent places where mutually dependent and interrelated groups of professionals and para-professionals work” (p. 201).

106 The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario in 2006 received $8 million from the Ministry of Education for teachers’ professional learning opportunities. One of the major initiatives ETFO developed was the Poverty and Education Project, which focused on supporting students from impoverished backgrounds. ETFO’s Poverty and Education Project connected research to practice and pedagogical approaches. In November of 2008, ETFO held a symposium which brought together teachers and administrators from schools, activists, educators, and representatives from the government and faculties of education.

107 “We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits,” (Berry, 2002, p. 20).
school that they could grow up and go out into the world and be whatever they wanted to be. They could get out of this situation and out of this small town. However, implicitly within these statements is saying that what you are is not good enough, what you have is not okay. So you have to choose, to be with your family and your neighbours and everything you know, or, you have to choose to be something different. And that the two can’t co-exist.’

“I felt awful. Her words made me rethink my own teaching practice because I too had been sending messages that implicitly valued my embodied cultural capital assets that involve my beliefs around educational, social, and intellectual knowledge to the students in my class. I sensed I had a lot of learning to do,” I said.

“You never know until you walk in someone’s shoes. You can’t judge. I think that’s another valuable idea…don’t be judgemental. You’d drive yourself crazy. That’s not saying lower your standards, because I still set the bar pretty darn high for my students. You jump as high as you can to reach it, but be aware of the limitations. They might need an extra leg up to reach that bar,” she said.

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An outcome that I hope for first year teachers and veteran teachers, alike, is that they may begin to consider how their past experiences have influenced the present lenses through which they see the world; and the importance of and potential that continual reflexive inquiry brings to your practice as an educator. Through reflexive inquiry can help educators to
identify and avoid what Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann refer to as pitfalls; to
develop goals for our learning and direction; and to opening ourselves to
possibilities within our practice.

   Educators need to take a thorough inquiry approach into their
professional practices considering how our personal identities impact our ways
of being as educators. For inquiry to have an impact on practice, teachers must
make connections by goal setting and explicit conversations about equity for
improving educational opportunities for student affected by poverty. To “give
a leg up,” as Darla would say, or to improve equity within a situation of
poverty, educators must not deny students the same diversified educational
experiences that other students have. Specifically in the case of King Albert
Public School, students who do not have regular access to a gymnasium do not
have the opportunity to play competitive and recreational sports. This limits
their opportunity to learn about playing as a team, about time management, and
about the benefits of physical activity.

   Principals hold a special position in schools, they are both educators and
leaders. If principals understand the value of having honest relationship with
parents there is unimaginable potential. By valuing the impact parents and staff
can have by working together, parents become allies in the educational process
instead of adversaries. Increasing parent involvement requires multiple
strategies in formal and informal ways, and cannot be limited to Parent Council.
At King Albert, parents who were involved with decision making and advocacy
activities, as well as, collaborating with community businesses and agencies felt they were best strengthening and supporting their child’s development.

About Inquirers and Researchers:

At the end of the interviews I asked the participants “Is there anything else that you think that I should know as I try to understand King Albert more fully? Anything I’ve missed?” I wanted them to have the final word.

Anne replied, “I don’t think so. I think you’ve been there, and you know. I wouldn’t move my kids out of there at all. That’s the question — if you really want to know how somebody feels about the school that their kids go to, you don’t ask them specifics about their teacher or about the administration. Ask them if they would move their kids, if they could? If they say no, then you know, that all that stuff is little. Or ultimately the parents feel their kids are getting a good education. I seriously wouldn’t trade any of those teachers. They are all awesome. So when you find that, you stick with it.”

While teaching I had a parent of one of the boys in Grade Two tell me that she had moved back so that her boys could go to King Albert. She felt that teachers were more patient and her children were happier. Another family I spoke to mentioned that, even when they moved across town, they chose to drive their children back to King Albert. Their kids were happy. Through a conversation with Bob, I discovered his children did not go to the school in their neighbourhood either.

Bob said, “It’s interesting you should ask that. Well, why aren’t my kids going to that other school? Because I love the teachers that are here. I
know what they’re getting. And it’s paid off. Because when we’ve done our
testing, we rank fairly well. Well, we’ve come up a long way. So therefore I
have a lot of pride in the school and the teachers and that’s where I want my
kids.”

Inquires and researchers need to recognize the multiple voices and
narratives being told at a school, and continue to reject the single story. There
is never a single story about a place. Nigerian born author, Chimamanda Ngozi
Adichie (2009) said, “I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly
with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place
and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of
dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It
emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” When I was
little I remember drawing pictures of a house — a square with a triangle roof,
four rectangle windows and a door in the middle. That is never what the house
I lived in looked like. I knew how to draw a school too. King Albert Public
School is only a two-dimensional place until illuminated by all stories that
provide its identity.

*About Policy-Making:*

Bob said, “King Albert, I’m just so thankful for that place. I mean
there’s so many other places out there, like I said, we are really high needs and
that’s why we have a lot of help in there to fill that void. But, I mean, in every
other school I’m sure they love the kids there and I’m sure they go the whole
mile, but, what I’ve experienced here, I’ve never seen any lack of caring, love, and concern.”

A community business owner and operator whose children attended King Albert and has continued to support the school since their graduation said, “I just hope the school stays. We need a neighbourhood school, and I think that neighbourhood schools are very important. That’s all.”

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Policy makers at the local level need to consider the importance this community places on its neighbourhood school when making decisions, and also place value on indicators of success or satisfaction on things other than test scores. Stakeholders at King Albert defined community as a priority both within the classroom, the school, and community at large. In most of the conversations I had, parents had little to say about the value of test scores but what they wanted to talk most was how happy their children were at King Albert. Policy makers must also ‘level the playing field’ for students in challenging circumstances. “Schools most in need of additional resources (for field trips, for arts, for sports) are the very schools least able to raise them, the province, either by design or by default, allows an inequity to continue by denying students affected by poverty the same diversified and interesting educational experiences that better off children take for granted” (Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010, p. 30).

About Parents and Community Participants
I hope that parents read this see what is possible when working together with the school. Parent play an important role their children’s informal and formal education, and that their role is complementary to that of the educators.

“Leithwood’s (2006) study of teacher working conditions includes warnings about teachers ‘volunteer’ work… recommendations for high poverty schools often tacitly suggest that individual, entrepreneurial effort on the part of teachers and administrators is all that is needed for school improvement. Our sense of both the published literature…is that such approaches are neither feasible at the large scale nor sustainable” (Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010). For community participants, there is no need to work in isolation, but that by working together, sharing resources and expertise can provide a greater help. Finally, all stakeholders must continue to redefine what they believe a ‘good’ or ‘successful’ school to be.

About Learning

“Each woman has potential access to Rio Abajo Rio, this river beneath the river [meaning a knowing of the soul]. She arrives there through deep meditation, dance, writing, painting, prayermaking, singing, drumming, active imagination, or any activity which requires an intense altered consciousness. A woman arrives in this world-between worlds through yearning and by seeking something she can see just out of the corner of her eye” (Estés, 1992, p. 31).

I have always known the power of storytelling to convey a message. Through this research project, I accessed the river beneath the river and gained a knowing about the stories I have lived and the stories that I tell. I now
consider what impacts certain types of negative or single story narratives can have on my perspectives and how I view the world. I have a new idea as to the purpose of schooling with connections to community. I am more confident in my identity as a teacher. My stories, the secret stories do not need to be free and open to the world, but I do need to consider the stories that I am telling to myself, the stories that have been told to me my whole life, and the stories of others as this is a way to explore my thinking and practice. Though the school was vibrant to me as a teacher, when I reflexively considered all that had occurred there, it gained new depth. My river was polluted with thoughts of these children not being good enough, blaming them for their choices, blaming the parents for the poverty, but now I think of the roles of parents, teachers, and community members as complimentary. Pulled through the river, this new course challenged me to confront my privilege, and rough edges are worn smooth as I consider my positioning in the world.

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There is a river that runs beside my childhood home. It cuts and carves its way through from Scugog Lake, past my parents house, to the falls and the locks, through the town and on out into Sturgeon Lake before it splits heading both north and east. This river shaped my early sense of identity. But in the same way that this water is not the same water I swam and played and canoed in as a little girl, I am not the same either. My foundation is solid but my spirit pulls, pushes, rushes, and swirls. It was leaving and returning and leaving again
that revealed to me the extent to which my sense of self was deeply informed by the geography of that place.

Before leaving town to return to Toronto to document all that I had seen and heard and experienced, I stopped at the gas station about two blocks away from King Albert. I asked the owner how his children were doing at school. He said there were good, that the oldest would be graduating from KAPS this year. He asked me about university and questioned why I was back in town. I explained my research project to him.

As gasoline flowed into the tank, he said, “You hear it in our customers, ‘King Albert is no good.’ And I say ‘No, no, no. What King Albert was before — I don’t know. But since Mrs Avery is there, it is a nice school. I say that to customers. And they say ‘It’s so different?’ And I say ‘Yes, you will see.’ But that’s the main thing: The principal and teachers work so hard, I see that."

I pulled out of town, back past the Tim Hortons’ and my parents’ insurance brokerage, past the Dairy Queen and the park, past my parents’ house and the golf course. When I hit the city limits, I turned up the music.

I drove the back roads, country roads crossing concession after concession. Various creeks, tributaries, and rivers etch their way across the land creating their own design in the landscape. Through hamlets where only a general store, a school, and a church mark the town. These buildings mark that we were here, and we lived. They were a place for people to come together. These buildings built a community.

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Rivers begin with a series of feeder streams. Small creeks and brooks are shaped by the land, forced around rocks, and tree roots until they continue into other currents in streams. The water begins small and slow, but gains momentum as it flows into larger tributaries. These eventually mass into a river. The river is large and powerful enough to carve its own way through the land, unhindered it flows through, changing the shape of the land. Pressure builds and the river bends, sharply shifting the direction. Eventually the river outflows into further tributaries and estuaries.

At King Albert Public School, a few individuals began, pulling others along creating a structure and a force powerful enough to cause a shift in direction. The construction of the gym is at the heart of this project. The teachers, parents, community members and students building a gym, and by doing so they built a community. The outflows or impacts of this project on staff, students, and community members is infinite.
Bibliography


Nicholls, R. (Director). (2006). *Pam: Discovering local history* [Motion Picture]. Lindsay, Ontario, Canada: [undistributed final research project].


APPENDIX A. School Incident Report

STUDENT NAME ___________________________________ SCHOOL INCIDENT FORM

INCIDENT DATE _______________ GRADE ___ SUPERVISING TEACHER ___________
WITNESSED EVENT YES NO

INCIDENT (Please check all that apply and at least one from "Incident Type", "Nature" and "Target").

Incident Type

Physical

- Violation of the “hands-off” rule
- Pushing/shoving
- Fighting
- Throwing objects
- Property damage
- Other ___________________________

Verbal

- Impolite/rude
- Name-calling / insults
- Profanity
- Other ___________________________

Non-Verbal

- Refusal to follow instructions
- Inappropriate noises
- Gestures (sexual)
- Body language (posturing, stares)
- Other ___________________________

Nature

- Impulsive act
- Defiance / opposition
- Threats / intimidation
- Bullying
- Sexual harassment
- Racial harassment
- Other ___________________________

Target

- Adult / supervisor
- Student
- School property
- Other ___________________________

LOCATION

- Classroom
- Playground
- Hallway
- Other ___________________________

INTERVENTION BY TEACHER

- Verbal Intervention / Reprimand
- Warning
- Time-Out / Loss of Privileges
- Detention

INTERVENTION BY OFFICE

- Counselling
- Letter to Parents
- Phone call to parents
- Loss of classroom privilege
- Suspension

We have sent this form home for your information; however, you may contact the school for more information if you wish.

Please sign the report and return it to the school. ___________________________________________

Please contact the school about this incident.

E. J. Avery, Principal
APPENDIX B. Think Paper

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

What happened was:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

My part in it was?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Three better choices that I could make are:
1. ______________________________________________________________________
2. ______________________________________________________________________
3. ______________________________________________________________________

What will I do next time?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

When I choose this behaviour, I choose the consequences. What happens if I don’t make a better choice next time?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Signature of Parent: ____________ Teacher/Principal ____________