NEGOTIATING SCHOOL:
A NARRATIVE STUDY

by

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Abstract

*Negotiating School* is an investigation into the work of parents who adapted schooling to custom fit their child rather than simply depositing the child at the neighbourhood school and trusting the school to decide what to do. Following the methodology of narrative inquiry, this study analyzes the experiences of the author’s family and seven other families as they dealt with school. This study identifies many strategies parents may employ as they navigate their child’s schooling. This continuum of strategies starts with minor actions such as maintaining close communications with teachers to the radical move of quitting school altogether for unschooling. Although *Negotiating School* never intended to make any claim of generalizability, the strategies that emerged from the participant’s stories seem to cover the territory of possible school negotiations available to parents. Initially, this thesis had in mind parents who sought a humanistic, child-centred education which would reflect their own intensive parenting style. However, as they told their stories, it became clear that some of my participants privileged traditional concerns, such as the quality of teaching, the coherence of the curriculum, and the conduct of the other students in the building. Regardless, the techniques of negotiating school served both ends of the educational spectrum, the progressive and the traditional. Without intending to, *Negotiating School* has taken on some features of a longitudinal study. Children I met in kindergarten are now in university. Experiments have played out. Some utopian hopes have taken a bad turn. But all my participants were school negotiators, intensely involved in their children’s schooling.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The Core Idea

_Negotiating School: A Narrative Study_ is an investigation of how many parents work to adapt schooling to custom-fit their child (Ayers, 2003, p. 11; Carpenter, 2005; Fletcher, I., 1972, p. 181; Neill, 1960). In this study, I inquire into the schooling experiences of my family and the families of seven friends. My wife and I negotiated many twists and turns in the course of our son Liam’s schooling, from taking time off work to raise him, to moving neighbourhoods, to finding a highly-recommended school (as listed in the _National Post_’s yearly rankings of schools in Toronto), to removing him from the Catholic junior kindergarten, to homeschooling him, to attending an alternative public school for senior kindergarten, to returning to homeschooling for Grade 1, to investigating the establishment of a private school, to going back to the original Catholic school for Grades 2 to 8, to enrolling him in a Catholic boys’ secondary school, and to conferring frequently with the principal and the teachers on Liam’s behalf (Williams, 1985).

The term “negotiating” takes meaning from management negotiations. Just as competing parties bargain to reach contractual agreements, so, too, do school-negotiating parents negotiate with each other, the child, societal norms, and the institution of school (Fullan, M., 1991, pp. 228-243; Williams, 1985).

“Negotiating school” also suggests a metaphor of driving a car: at the forks in the road, some drivers turn here, others turn there. Serious school negotiators will veer their own way, while most parents take one common road. They often suffer fear and doubt for following “the road not taken” (Frost, 1921, p. 21). It is difficult to be different.

I substantiate the core ideas of this study by reviewing the relevant scholarly literature and situating school negotiation within the larger field of curriculum studies. I also describe and justify my research methodology, narrative inquiry, within the qualitative research frame. A crucial tenet of narrative inquiry is that the researcher must bring forward a personal justification for entering into the inquiry. By highlighting the context and the background stories, I can remain true to the scholarly task, laying bare my assumptions and rationale for the work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I use stories to understand the experience of parents who negotiate school. I draw upon the work of Clandinin and Connelly who state, “stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience” (1994, p. 415). The
following story illustrates the tensions some parents experience when they take their children to school.

**My Year of Living Dangerously**

Our son Liam came to us when I was 49 and my wife, Veronica, was 42. We were two teachers who chose to work half-time to raise our child ourselves. He was unhappy in junior kindergarten (JK) at the neighbourhood Catholic school so we kept him home for that year. We transferred him to a public alternative school for senior kindergarten (SK). Veronica returned to full-time work and I took my teacher pension, volunteered in his class, which the alternative school encouraged, and minded him in the afternoon. This alternative school connected us to a community of families with their children becoming his playmates.

The following year, Grade 1, I continued with my option of volunteering in the class although most parents quit after kindergarten. While doing so, I noticed that the new Grade 1 teacher was improvising the daily instruction without any apparent plan. Normally, I would applaud such spontaneity if it led to the children studying what interested them most. Instead, it meant that she read out loud randomly selected story books that happened to be on the shelf in the classroom. These readings would usually last for forty-minute periods while she told the students to keep their mouths closed, ears open, and eyes on her. The mathematics lesson also showed no design (Pratt, 1980). At the end of my first day in this class, I suggested that the mathematics groups separate the Grade 1 students from the Grade 2s so that the parents could better focus on one text at a time. She deemed my suggestion to be “interference” and reported it to the principal. The principal dismissed my complaint about teacher preparation and backed the teacher (Campbell, 2003). I was asked to stay out of the class, but Liam wanted me there. We therefore withdrew him from the school.

I felt panicky not knowing where to place him. However, the next day, my friend Lara came by with her two daughters Marion (age 5) and Caroline (age 3). Marion had been Liam’s classmate the previous year in JK/SK. Lara informed us that she had withdrawn Marion from the school for the same reason as ours. She found the new JK/SK teacher to be incompetent, harsh and lacking any feeling for young children. I no longer felt alone, as my family teamed up with Lara’s to begin our year of homeschooling, our year of living dangerously outside the system.
Situating the Study within the Scholarly Literature

My study draws on three literatures. First, I look at writings that attach education to experience and experience to narrative. Second, I review the counterculture critique of education from the 1960s, which informed my decision to become a teacher and provided the “key ideas” of my philosophy of education (Whitehead, 1933). Third, I look at texts that helped guide my family and my participants’ families through school negotiation.

The key ideas of education, life, and experience. Dewey’s theory of experience and education helped me elucidate my theory of education. Dewey’s statement, “Education . . . is a process of living and not a preparation for living” (1972, p. 87) supports my definition. For Dewey, education is a positive, ever-present process (1938, p. 36), linked to growth (p. 38), and the reconstruction of experience (p. 64). Education is growth because of a culmination of experiences organized over time in social situations (p. 44). Education is a living process, growing out of situations that are both “historical and social, orderly and dynamic” (Hall-Quest as cited in Dewey, 1938, p. 11).

Connelly and Clandinin added the notion of narrative to Dewey’s emphasis on the experiential, practical, and personal. “Education . . . is a narrative of experience that grows and strengthens a person’s capabilities to cope with life” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 27). Connelly and Clandinin added, “a curriculum can become one’s life course of action” (1998, p. 1).


Schwab’s (1978) curricular commonplaces, subject matter, milieu, learner, and teacher (p. 371-374) give a framework for school negotiators to understand what they are attempting. For school negotiators the subject matter is life itself. The classroom milieu becomes the home, the neighbourhood and the world at large. The learner is the child. The teachers are Dewey’s “more-mature learner[s],” (1938, p. 38) a category which, in the early years, emphasizes parents, neighbours, and family friends. In short, Schwab’s commonplaces offer a theoretical framework for thinking of curriculum as learning that goes on both in and outside school.

The following story, which was also featured in Veronica’s thesis (Ellis, V., 2002, p. 131), illustrates how Liam’s curriculum (as Schwab defines curriculum) began much earlier
than his schooling. When Liam was 14 months old, he picked up an old light bulb box, held it up in the air, and vocalized, “Ee, ee.” Veronica said, “Yes. That box had the new light bulb in it.” Then he got up and ran to the back door carrying the box calling, “Ee, ee.” We followed saying, “Yes, that is where we got the light bulb.” While he pointed and squealed at the shelf where the other light bulb boxes were we said, “Yes, it came from the shelf in the back stairwell.” He then ran to the kitchen, pointed up at the kitchen track lighting and squealed. He climbed on a chair, while pointing and trying to scramble on the counter. He tugged at me, exclaiming loudly, “Ee, ee.” I said, “Yes. Daddy got on the chair and then on the counter. Yes, then he took out the old bulb and put in a new bulb. You helped. You held the box and you gave Daddy the bulb.” Liam got down and pointed at the garbage cupboard. We opened its door. He lifted the garbage container lid, pointed at the old bulb, vocalized, “Oooohh,” and then touched the bulb lightly. We said, “The old bulb went into the garbage. It was hot.”

Here Liam’s subject matter was a background story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991 & 1994; Conle, 2005; Gudmundsdottir, 1997), part of the everyday experience of life (Schwab, 1978; Dewey, 1897, 1902 & 1938), the changing of light bulbs. As parent-educators within the milieu of the family, our task was simply to follow our learner’s interests. Our process of interpreting Liam’s preverbal stories (Ellis, V., 2002) gave him a way to communicate his learning to us (Gleason, 2005). Dewey stated, “Teaching and learning is a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” (1938, p. 87). Liam’s preverbal storytelling demonstrated how our teaching and his learning grew out of our reconstructing experience and negotiating meaning together (p. 87). We launched his schooling before he entered a building called school, as do most parents.

The sixties literature and its echoes. My second literature, the 1960s literature, follows the tradition of Dewey, opposing the technocratic educational model. The framework could be called holistic, existential, or authentic: “a worldview that honours the spiritual, ecological, and existential dimensions of life and does not subsume human existence under a consuming economic materialism” (Miller, 2002, p. viii). Some would argue that the 1960s literature is dated, romantic, and naïve. Miller retorts:

The literature of radical educational critique in the 1960s effectively deconstructed solidly entrenched assumptions about the nature of teaching, learning, and knowledge. Although the resurgence of mainstream cultural values rapidly banished this critique to obscurity, it remains potent and relevant to the educational challenges of an emerging postmodern culture. (pp. ix-x)
My review of the 1960s literature is narrative and subjective: the literature spoke to me personally and professionally. These key ideas have influenced my thinking and action for 45 years of teaching. This counterculture literature critiques the capitalist, materialist technocracy of public education. Goodman (1960) ascribed blame to society for youth’s alienation. Holt (1969) argued that schools are bad places for children. He later advocated free schools and, when they fell apart, he fathered the “unschooling” camp of the homeschool movement (1981). Kozol’s *Death at an Early Age* (1967) made an explicit political critique of schooling, and his *Free Schools* (1972) argued for social justice for the poor. Postman and Weingartner, in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, called for “daring and vigorous ideas on which to build a new approach to education” (1969, p. xiv). Leonard, in *Education and Ecstasy* (1968) noted that society requires educators to prevent “the new generation from changing in any deep or significant way” (p. 7), but concluded by saying “a new education is already here, thrusting up in spite of every barrier” (p. 239) Silberman saw in classrooms “mutilation visible everywhere—mutilation of spontaneity, of joy in learning, of pleasure in creating, of sense of self” (1970, p. 10). Ivan Illich (1972) claimed that institutionalized school ultimately thwarted learning.

The most “influential” critical work of the 1960s, according to Miller (2002, p. 4), was *Summerhill*. Here, A. S. Neill (1960) offered a solution to the alienation of schooling identified by the 1960s critics. He formulated Summerhill School as a therapeutic school for normal children (Lamb, 1992) that would foster personal wholeness and emotional strength. At Summerhill, the child was free to attend classes or not, to study what he or she liked. Students could play as long as they wanted, but usually by age 13, they would knuckle down and learn the material necessary for writing their O level examinations, and gain entrance to post-secondary education. Neill (1960) summarized traditional schools as “army regiments or worse. Soldiers at least move around a lot, but a child sits on his bottom most of the time at an age when the whole human instinct is to move” (p. 4). Ayers (2003), Cassebaum (2003), and Hart (1970) also shared this concern.

*Living and Learning* (The Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario [PCAOESO], 1968) showed a very sympathetic reading of the radical 1960s critique: “Basically the school’s learning experiences are imposed, involuntary and structured. The pupil becomes a captive audience from the day of entry . . . subject to countless restrictions,” but “many schools are finding their way out of the maze of regulations and traditions of the past and are entering a new age of child centered education” (p. 54). The 1960s
critics saw the school system as dehumanizing and attempted to combat it by building counter institutions such as free schools.

Launching this thesis led me to more recent writings that echo the 1960s critique. They include Kohn, Schank, Goldberg, and Fletcher. Kohn (2004) challenged us to think about our purposes in education rather than our techniques. Schank (2004) mocked compulsory curriculum. Borrowing from Shakespeare, he concluded, “one must study what one affects” (p. 24). Goldberg added, “Great harm is done when there is a systematic suppression of a child’s interests, values, and idiosyncratic potentials” (1996, p. 3). Fletcher accused schools of “the execution of creative initiative” (1972). These current writers argued that paying attention to the child’s individuality outweighs achieving learning outcomes.

**The educational pendulum swings.** Unfortunately, my child came into this world just when Ontario, following other North American jurisdictions, had launched a neoliberal reform with emphasis on standardization, centralized curriculum, accountability, and testing (Aurini & Davies, 2005). In my career as pupil, teacher, consultant, and principal, I have seen the pendulum of educational policy swing from the rigid, sometimes violent, teacher-centered system of the 1950s to a child-centered, decentralized approach, which attained some traction even before Living and Learning in 1968. Now, with the current policy, launched in 1994 (Royal Commission on Learning [RCL], 1994) and enforced by central testing, the teacher’s attention has turned away from the child to the learning outcomes: the pendulum has completed another cycle.

The following is a personal, historical narrative of my experiences with the pendulum. In 1960, I graduated from a Catholic school in Grade 8. There we sat in silent rows, eyes turned down towards our textbooks, memorizing what the teacher said would be on the test. In that class, I was the student who attained the highest marks while getting strapped the most often. In 1968, I returned to elementary school with a BA, without teacher certification, to substitute teach. At this time, in some schools, a revolution in teaching was underway (Miller, 2002). Young teachers worked in teams (Heathers, 1964, pp. 345-375), in open plan schools (Metropolitan Toronto School Board, 1973), and collaborated with their students. Teacher librarians helped students pursue their own interests and write up what they learned as “projects.”

The system was opening up. Ideas planted in the late 1950s were blossoming in the 1960s (Goodlad, J. I., & Anderson, R. H., 1987). A period of youth, liberation, and optimism held sway when the Ministry of Education and the Teachers’ Federations welcomed child-
centeredness. *Living and Learning* (PCAOESO, 1968) led the way, followed by *P1.J1 The Formative Years* (Ministry of Education, 1976) and *To Herald the Child* (LaPierre, 1977). This was a time of decentralization when “the Ministry of Education handed over . . . authority and responsibility to educators at the local level to actually write the courses of study” (T. L. Wells, Minister of Education, as cited in Connelly, Dukacz & Quinlan, 1980, p. i).


From 1993 to 1997, the Ministry phased in outcomes-based education (Spady, 1993). In 1997, the expectations became uniform and centralized throughout Ontario. The Ministry also introduced centralized testing by establishing the Education, Quality, and Accountability Office (EQAO). The Grade 3 and Grade 6 tests began, and in the school year of 2000–2001, they were followed by the Grade 10 literacy tests.

In 1997, the Ministry mailed to the parents the common curriculum, with its mandated expectations. Teachers now had someone new looking over their shoulders, not just the principal and superintendent. Of course, parents had always looked over teachers’ shoulders, but now they could be more exacting. Clearly, teachers would no longer start units that sprang from the student’s enthusiasm but would concentrate on the common curriculum and external, test-centered objectives often divorced from the lives of children (RCL, 1994, p. 30). Of course, the Board had always had its core curriculum, but teachers and administrators had tacitly agreed that teachers could diverge in the service of student interests. In fact, superintendents in the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) would embrace such divergent initiatives. Now, to protect one’s reputation and that of one’s school, teaching to the EQAO test was necessary. Many researchers have noted this deleterious trend (Craig, 1995; Kohn, 2004). Most recently, *The New York Times* reported that thousands of American schools teach only the two subjects that are tested nationally, English and mathematics (Dillon, 2006).
The return swing of the pendulum, the neo-liberal reform, fuelled my drive to negotiate school. As Aurini and Davies note “many embrace homeschooling in reaction to recent reforms that can be characterized as neo-liberal, such as Ontario’s initiatives for standardized tests, tougher standards, ‘league tables’ and other rating and accountability schemes” (2005, p. 466). Child-centered rhetoric remains in reports such as For the Love of Learning (RCL, 1994), but putting it into practice became very difficult in the test-driven world. The changes weakened the chances of a child-centered education that included the values of the previous thirty years. I worried about Liam joining a system that I deemed more reminiscent of the 1950s than the best practices of the following thirty years (Robertson, 2004).

**Literature for school negotiators.** This literature supports the school negotiations chosen by my family and my participants’ families. The readings divide into three lines of thinking about schooling: the individual, the institutional, and the narrative. I derive this scheme from Connelly and Clandinin’s “six research perspectives” (1988, pp. 105-112).

The individual conception privileges the child’s interests and drives. This approach “prizes a customized experience to enhance a child’s personality, idiosyncratic talents, and sense of self” (Aurini & Davies, 2005, p. 467). Another type of individual schooling would be the “free schools” (Miller, 2002) which prize freedom from compulsory curriculum and freedom to elect one’s own interests.

The institutional conception of school views the school as an agency that initiates students into the bureaucratic forms of society (Olson, 2003). This is the public school philosophy, the idea that groups of 30 students or so will all be able to meet the prescribed goals and follow the same curricular path. This approach allows little room for the pursuit of the child’s own interests or for self-discovery and exploration.

The narrative conception synthesizes the first two, with the parent enrolling the child in the institution, but working for the individual needs, interests, and drives of the child. The parent does this while keeping a look out for the “once and future school” (White, 1987), that possible place that serves both constituents: the child and society. Some parents do find such a place; others have it as a hope, perhaps a vain hope.

**The individual conception of school.** Liam and I practised the individual conception of school by homeschooling for two years: JK and Grade 1. During Grade 1, my co-homeschooler, Lara, recommended my reading Dumbing Us Down (Gatto, 2002). Gatto demonstrated how the medium of schooling—not content, not lessons—communicates its major effects. The medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964). The medium of bell ringing at the end of subject periods sends
the message that whatever you are engaged in inevitably will be interrupted. You will separate from that work and begin another subject. “No work is worth finishing, so why care too deeply about anything?” Gatto affirmed my decision to homeschool Liam: I was protecting Liam from the bells. Nevertheless, I felt pressure to get Liam up to a Grade 1 reading level. I turned to Elkind’s *The Hurried Child* (1981). He cited the research that showed that later readers (Grade 2) caught up to early readers (Grade 1) by Grade 4 and were more enthusiastic, spontaneous readers in adolescence (1981, p. 31). Elkind encouraged my unhurried homeschool pace.

What was Liam’s homeschooling in Grade 1 like? To give you a picture, here is an excerpt from my contribution to *Even Hockey Players Read* (Booth, 2002):

I call Liam’s homeschool the “Huck Finn School for Boys.” We learn by moving, we learn by walking. Moving, scooting, climbing on the rocks at the beach is good for boys... We take up large issues, such as the nature of God, while talking in our bathtub. “How big is an atom bomb?” he asks... We keep school down to a reasonable time, as do some European countries, finishing at 1:00 p.m. We have a perfect schedule: talk, play, and formal learning in the morning. Play with friends in the afternoons. (p. 50)

That year, we had SK friends from the last year’s JK/SK class, but soon, next September, they would be confined to school for the full day. Liam would be lonely and I desperate. In September 2002, we had to return him to the system, find an alternative school, or increase exponentially our contact with homeschoolers. Lara and I investigated the homeschool world. We signed up for the email list of the Toronto Homeschoolers and we attended meetings of the East Toronto Homeschoolers who organized quasi-school activities such as book talks in local libraries. Through the winter months, I felt discouraged as our contacts were failing to become new friends. Many homeschoolers had large families with sufficient social interaction without us. As we attended events organized by homeschoolers, I found dull, poor substitutes for the excursions and artists-in-schools program organized by the school boards and the individual public schools. When I worked for the Board, I was a curriculum consultant who specialized in placing artists in school. I sat on the Board of Inner City Angels and filed applications with the Ontario Arts Council. I therefore knew that the schools had better opportunities than the homeschool league. Lara successfully provided teaching for her girls by paying for private lessons in subjects such as dance, drama, and piano. She, in effect, bought a supplementary, parallel school system in components instead of paying a private school tuition.
Let us now look at the literature of homeschooling. Prior to the 1850s, homeschooling was the norm in many parts of the civilized world. To illustrate, in 1801, Pestalozzi wrote the homeschooling manual for mothers, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*. Today some scholars classify homeschoolers as either ideologues or pedagogues (Van Galen, 1991; Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995). Ideologues, those concerned with the content of school, are mainly religious, predominantly Christian fundamentalists. Other ideological motives include parenting and educational philosophy (Colfax & Colfax, 1988; Laing, 1999). Pedagogues reject the methods of traditional schooling. Holt (1964, 1981) and Gatto (2002) reject the medium or milieu of school. Holt’s unschooling philosophy promises that the child’s curiosity will manufacture a busy program of learning without instruction. We noted such a drive with Liam’s pre-verbal investigation of light bulbs. Aurini and Davies (2005) describe some recent iterations of homeschooling. They use the term “expressive motive” (p. 469) to label the purposes of those who “desire a kinder and gentler form of schooling” (p. 471).

Free schooling, an instance of alternative schooling, comprises my second form of individual schooling. I turned away from the common school ideal to consider choice, a fractious topic (Petronio, 1996). Alternative schools (including private ones) provide unique pedagogy that pivots away from the common school ideal to the ideal of school choice (Carpenter, 2005; Vriend, 1992). Alternative schooling, sometimes called “schools in opposition,” offers non-traditional experience outside state control. Alternatives can be private or public. The private options include Waldorf, Montessori, and free schools. Public alternative schools respond to parent demand for alternatives by acknowledging the usefulness of program diversity (Bomotti, 1996). Many 1960s-style schools have faded, but some continue to flourish such as Woodlawn, Scarsdale, and the School Without Walls. (Clark, 2000) The original free school interest-driven concept may continue in the charter school movement, depending on the charter.

I investigated three such alternative school options. The first was the public alternative school with its history dating back to the early 1970s, when the boards began to compete with private free schools for the alternative school market. Liam’s SK teacher there ran a well-organized, non-coercive, semi-traditional program.

By Liam’s first grade, however, the school’s ambiguities became apparent. No clear philosophy separated it from a mainstream school. Many of the teachers who transferred there had no vocation for collaboration with parents or giving students choices. Finally, the Ministry, by then, had centralized and assumed responsibility for the curriculum, which logically undercut
the board’s powers to offer any real alternative programming. I would call it a “failed alternative school.” The school had changed since the 1970s, and what was promised was not there anymore (Bomotti, 1996).

My second attempt concerned a proposal to found a school with Lara. I would administrate, she would teach. She had talent and experience at running an arts-based nursery school. I thought she could successfully run a small JK to Grade 3 private school of about 12 students. I wrote up a prospectus but Lara had other plans and continued homeschooling.

My third attempt concerned setting up a private school based on the philosophy of the Sudbury Valley School founded in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts which by now has 38 derivative schools. The philosophy requires students to decide their own curriculum based on their interests, and going fishing is an acceptable educational activity. A Sudbury Valley School is democratic in that students and staff have an equal vote at a weekly school meeting to determine school policies, rules, and staffing.

I joined a group of founders in May 2002 but stopped attending meetings in July. I left because the founders wanted to implement the model of the original school exactly, not realizing that every implementation is a local implementation (Fullan & Park, 1981). For example, the original school located on a farm had an “open campus” which meant that children could roam freely without restriction. My fellow founders felt obliged to copy this practice but I argued that with our school located on a busy city street we could not risk it.

I also opposed the notion that a student needed no calendar, bulletin board, places to go, or suggested topics to study. The philosophy regarded these opportunities as impositions that would deter the child from digging deep inside herself to find her true interests (Greenberg, 1992). My understanding of psychology suggested that people make their choices from a menu offered by the culture. If the school does not provide some choices, such as an excursion to the museum, then PlayStation will fill the void with its options. Like A. S. Neill (1995), I believed in freedom, but like John Dewey (1938) I believed that some choices are miseducative and a waste of time. On the menu of Liam’s educational choices, I wanted artistic and cultural activities with student choice. I trusted Liam; he would make wise choices if he had a comprehensive selection of options. Safety, subject matter, our decision-making process, and the fact that the school would not open for another year decided me against this option. Therefore, we returned to the same Catholic public school we had left in JK.

**The institutional conception of school.** Next, let us look at the institutional conception. (Here I focus on Liam’s elementary schooling.) “They’re doing university reading,” Liam said,
when we tested out Grade 1 at St. Demetrius for the last two weeks of June. I had not pressured him to learn to read during our Grade 1 homeschooling year. Upon joining full-time in Grade 2, he disliked most subjects. He said that school was “destroying his childhood” (Freire, 1993). He hated the spelling with its repetitive drills. “Write the answer and re-copy the complete sentence,” the teacher directed, when writing just the answer would cut homework by 90%.

Summing up his experience he said, “School is soooo loooong.” Yet he wanted school. He liked belonging to something larger than the homeschool. But, for the social life of school of belonging to a school, the trade offs were onerous.

In a previous paper (Ellis W., 2004), I analyzed this clash between the child and the institution. I wanted school to be an “environment for personal growth.” Olson states, “The goal of school is . . . teaching students how to participate in the bureaucratic institutions of a larger society” (2003, p. 296). Participating in this kind of school chafed Liam. Under the current conditions, certain irritations are unrelenting in tax-funded schools, affronting the child’s sense of self and the notion that he is a unique, important individual. One teacher governs thirty children to achieve the prescribed outcomes. “There is no good reason why all children should not have mastered the basic literacy skills before the end of Grade 3” (RCL, 1994, p. 28).

Therefore, the child requires the traditional strict social controls: seating plans, turn taking, line-ups, quiet, surveillance, and correction (Foucault, 1977). Other irritants derive from the dysfunctions of teachers and principals who may make mistakes or behave badly (Campbell, 2003; Holt, 1964; Kozol, 1967). They may assign too much homework, lose self-control, speak harshly, stop listening, or act punitively. These systemic dysfunctions offend the child’s sense of natural justice (Neill, 1995, p. 23).

Although Olson (2003) laments pedagogy’s failure to incorporate the advancements of learning psychology, he emphasizes the needs of the institution over those of the child. The constraints of the institution reflect the complex forces at play in a bureaucratic society. These forces involve interest groups, monetary constraints, and changing educational philosophies. The school is responsible for maintaining societal norms, giving credentials, and helping students accept “responsibility for putting their thought and action in line with the accepted practices of society” (Olson, 2003, p. 293).

Can we invent a school that achieves personal growth and society’s bureaucratic requirements as Dewey (1902) recommended? In a conversation with Dr. Olson (personal communication, April 14, 2006), we concluded that such a school could exist. Call it Deweyan with features such as debate, interest projects, free choice curriculum, active learning,
discussion, and community involvement (Ediger, 2004). Such a place, Olson thought, would need to be private, with a low pupil-teacher ratio, and a consistent humanistic philosophy. Under the current conditions, financial restraint, common curriculum, and neo-liberal reform, it is unavailable to public education in Ontario. Ironically, despite poverty, some developing countries have been able to achieve, at scale, the Deweyan features I discussed with Dr. Olson (Farrell, 2009).

The narrative conception of school. In our final conception of school, I transpose Connelly and Clandinin’s “narrative research perspective” (1988) into a narrative conception of schooling. The research perspective “conceives of schooling as an expression of personal and social narrative history” (p. 109). My narrative conception is a form of “restorying” one’s life (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), a school negotiation whereby parents register the child in the school, fully aware of the institution’s unintended, harmful effects. They attempt, however, to mitigate these effects by a variety of strategies that include supplementing the formal education, helping the child detach at times from the school, engaging in dialogue with the school, and supporting the child at all times.

Where the institution fails to engage the child’s interests, the family can. For example, when Liam’s video game referred to NATO, a long discussion of the Cold War, communism and the West followed. The family discourses contribute to the child’s education. Such family investigations create a world of learning larger than schooling. This larger world of erudition puts school in its place. The home topics spring from the child’s interests: the period ends when his questions are answered to his satisfaction. The child now sees school as one venue of education that is often not the most engaging or authentic. In the life of the family, we also talk of schooling itself. Liam can critique the system, detach from it, and therefore take it less personally and suffer less.

Our narrative conception of school involves Liam’s psychology. When Liam said he hated his school, I told him he could leave. I said we could return to homeschooling, the public alternative school, or find a child-centered private school. We could join the Sudbury Valley free school. He always gave the same answer, “I want to stay at St. Demetrias.” I was not bluffing when I offered these choices. I would have moved him if he asked. I wanted him to feel in control. Control helps mitigate the harmful effects of stress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 239). I concluded: “Your St. Demetrias is like a club where you pay dues. If you want to belong, you pay with homework, attendance, and good marks.” In addition, here we have the essence of Olson’s concept of “joint intentions” (2003, p. 246). In exchange for duties, one gets
entitlements. I take this line as a last resort and it saddens me. I had hoped to negotiate an intrinsically satisfying school for him because I am wary of extrinsic rewards (Kohn, 1993). His main reward is his social life and the occasional lesson that matches his interests.

Finally, I contributed to the school’s goals by working on the school council and supporting projects that I believe in, ventures similar to Janiak’s (2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). We engage the teacher, volunteer in the classroom, and offer feedback. At school I would take on an assisting role, and mitigate harmful effects. (One has to be cautious when giving suggestions to teachers, careful to avoid sheer, harsh criticism.) I have had to advocate for Liam on a few occasions. Some parents fear doing that. They worry that if they interfere, the child will suffer reprisals. I find, however, that backing him ensures cautious treatment by staff.

The narrative conception of school downgrades the school to just one place and time in a larger picture of the child’s education and experience. In addition, we continue to look for that ideal situation, an intrinsically satisfying school that still meets society’s erratic requirements.
Chapter Two: Methodology

Why Narrative Inquiry

In this chapter, I attempt to explain why and how I chose narrative inquiry as the methodology for Negotiating School. When I read Dr. Eldridge’s thesis, Teachers Who Care (Scholes Eldridge, 1996), and when I participated in my wife’s thesis, Liam’s Stories (Ellis, V., 2002), I was impressed not only by the rich description of experience Eldridge and Ellis captured, but also by the emotional impact of narrative on the reader. This research method stays in the memory; readers may return to the stories over and over (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Egan, 1986), dialogue with them, and compare them to their own stories. I saw narrative inquiry as a research method that creates a document that is academic, but also easily accessible to a lay readership, particularly parents. I wanted this thesis to also be a teaching document or resource book.

Narrative Inquiry Theory

Narrative inquiry in education falls within the tradition of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and has its roots in other disciplines, such as anthropology, psychotherapy, and sociology. When OISE opened in 1968, we saw no courses such as Dr. Patrick Diamond’s Arts Based Research. Graduate schools of education produced only dissertations in the quantitative branch of research because they wanted educational research to be scientific. But as Diamond explained: “In the quantitative era, we learned more and more about less and less, and the results seemed meaningless” (personal communication, Sept. 10, 1998).

Qualitative research in education could not exist without John Dewey. As Connelly and Clandinin (2000) wrote, John Dewey was the “preeminent thinker in education” (p. 2). Narrative inquiry has its roots in John Dewey’s theory of experience and “the principle that development of experience comes about through interaction [which] means that education is essentially a social process” (Dewey, 1972, p.58).

Connelly spoke to his class of an educational conference he attended. The presenter asked the audience to name some important educational event in their lives. Connelly offered, “The death of my mother” (personal communication, July 10, 1996). The presenter dismissed this answer; he was looking for something more school related, more academic. But Connelly’s notion of education, which follows Dewey’s, suits this thesis well. John Dewey states that education and growth must be grounded in personal experience (Dewey, 1938, p.7).
In their pioneering paper, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry” (Educational Researcher, 1990), Connelly and Clandinin gave us an overview of narrative research and applied it to education. “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

In narrative inquiry, researchers write up the lives of participants by collecting their stories and writing an account of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2001). By re-telling the participants’ experience the researcher and the participant make meaning of that experience.

As both the object of the inquiry, and its methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), our stories allow us to seek meaning in action and to gain insight into complex situations. Since a story can be returned to repeatedly, it can be understood and reinterpreted on various levels over time. Because “stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415), they allow us to handle many hypotheses and variables cohesively. My participants and I shared stories via formal interviews and informal conversations to seek out the most educative situation practical for our children. Narrative inquiry captured what would elude me in a differently structured method. My work with my participants was deliberately “fluid” (Schwab, 1983) because, unlike the traditional thesis outline, which begins with a problem that seeks an answer, the purpose of this study was to inquire into the stories of the participants and distill from them strategies for negotiating school.

I tested the suitability of narrative inquiry for school negotiations in a pilot study entitled School Founders (Ellis, W., 2003).

**Preliminary Study**

School Founders compared my experiences with the experiences of my participant for that study, Mary. We both had joined a committee to found a local Sudbury Valley School (Greenberg, 1992, 1995), but had decided to leave the enterprise. We had not worked together then, since I had left before Mary joined. (Sudbury Valley Schools, which are based on A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School, will be discussed extensively in Jennifer’s story in Chapter 2.)

How did this pilot support narrative inquiry for this thesis, Negotiating School? The test study showed that people have to retell their stories to deepen and understand their experiences. Mary had to story and restory her experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, 1990, 1992;
Clandinin, 2007), which had overwhelmed her self-confidence. She needed to put her story “out there” (her phrase) to make sense of it. She sought my opinion, as someone with experience in public education and with the founders’ committee. As we met, I realized that I, too, had some restorying to do. Even eight months after Liam’s return to traditional school, our inquiry stirred my longing for a free school for Liam.

The study underscored the importance of what Conle (1996) termed “resonance” as a tool of research. My stories confirmed Mary’s stories; her stories rekindled my stories, as her stories resonated with mine. Conle, in her study of pre-service teachers, defined resonance as a “process where, through experiential storytelling, pre-service teachers connected specific items in current or past experiences to a narrative of their own or someone else’s experience. In this process, they subconsciously created metaphorical correspondences between two sets of narrativized experiences” (1996, p. 297). In Conle, the resonating story came to her teacher candidates accidentally. In School Founders, Mary and I expected to find resonance since we had both just recently experienced the founders’ committee and left it. The researcher’s and participant’s resonances, connections, and comparisons were found naturally in that pilot study, as they were in this thesis.

By writing School Founders, I gained access to an understanding of the concerns of my fellow school founders. I came to see an inability to accept dissenting ideas as understandable. Inclusion of these stories of disagreement and parting of the ways illustrated the benefits of a rich, textured description formed from examination of many perspectives. Other methods may separate each story to access an individual’s “truth,” whereas the narrative allows us to portray a story with many sides. Now in this thesis study, each participant has a story that may overlap other participant’s stories and give multiple perspectives of one contextual circumstance.

Connecting Narrative Inquiry to the Thesis, Negotiating School

In his textbook, Educational Research, Creswell (2012, p.507) has seven characteristics of narrative inquiry, which I use as a template for discussing my particular iteration of narrative inquiry methodology. I will use this template to discuss how my thesis conforms to or diverges from the average narrative inquiry. First, let us look at Creswell’s general terms. The main question of this thesis is: How do we as parents make the school fit the child rather than make the child fit the school (Neill, 1960)? Also, as research progressed, another question arose: How do we deal with school so that it is compatible with the family’s values? If we consider Creswell’s types of narrative inquiries (2012, p. 523), this one would fit under biographies, personal accounts, personal narratives, narrative interviews, and/or life histories. As in most
narrative inquiries, the literature review plays a minor role. I focus on “learning from participants in a setting” (Creswell, 2012, p 505). No theoretical lens is used, but the key ideas of intensive parenting (Arai, 2000), child-centred learning, and the educational pendulum are important.

Now let us look at the seven characteristics:

1. **Individual experiences.** *Negotiating School* focuses on eight participants’ experiences, including the researcher’s. Following Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990, 1992; Clandinin, 2007), these experiences are both personal and social. *Negotiating School* is necessarily interactive; it involves tensions among parents, the medium of schooling (McLuhan, 1964), and the persons that represent the school (teachers, principals, superintendents, and others). Following Dewey (1938), this inquiry especially values the continuity of an individual’s experience. It begins with the participant’s birth and continues through to the recent past.

In the literature of narrative inquiry within educational research, the emphasis is mainly on teachers, student-teachers, and sometimes pupils (Craig, 2011; Erickson & Miner, 2011; Kitchen, 2011). *Negotiating School* covers the missing link: the parents.

Just as there are biographical stories about teachers and teachers’ autobiographical stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), in this study we include stories about children, told by their parents. Sometimes children are quoted, but the parents are the narrators; I never formally interviewed the children.

2. **Chronology of the experiences.** As Cortazzi (1993) wrote, what makes narrative inquiry unique is its emphasis on reporting the chronology of the events of a participants’ life experience. Many narrative inquiries will contextualize an episode under study, such as a teacher’s use of computers by including a story of how the teacher started working with these machines. This inquiry goes back to each participant’s childhood to learn how her early life and schooling built her “personal practical knowledge” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) of education and the institutions of learning. The reader can then make his own conclusions about how the participants’ past experiences influenced their negotiating school decisions.

By going back to the participant’s childhood, I gather more stories of school negotiation. I see the negotiations of my participants’ parents, or lack thereof. By starting the story earlier than my participants’ school age, I also affirm the belief that the first educator is the parent. By starting at childhood, I was able to illuminate some of the root causes for some of my participants’ urges to veer away from the norm. As one of my family friends put it, “when
parents negotiate school for their child, they are either trying to replicate something good in their own schooling or make corrections for something terrible.”

3. Collecting individual stories. I conducted one-on-one interviews, with no group interviews. On one occasion, my wife Veronica joined the conversation with Alexandra. Several of the individual participants knew other participants, and in our interviews we alluded to the other participants, but they were never interviewed as a group. Concerning the novelistic elements of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Carter, 1993), we see a series of stories with unfolding plots, crises, and conclusions. My autobiographical story continues to be interwoven with those of other participants, similar to Huber and Whelan (1999). I find myself with a “nested set of stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p. 63). Other field texts such as journals, letters, and photographs are not part of this thesis. Since I wrote up their stories on large, ledger-sized paper before their eyes, my participants could co-create, alter, and improve them. My informal visits to my friends continued the schooling conversations.

4. Restorying. Creswell defines restorying as rewriting “the story to place it in a chronological sequence” (2012, p. 509) to gain “a causal link among ideas.” In addition to this aspect of restorying, I consider restorying to involve what Connelly and Clandinin refer to as “living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (1990, p.4). Restorying can lead to reliving, to changing one’s life. We find that happening with Mary in the preliminary study when she said she had to get her stories “out there” to make sense of them. Placing the story in the order of a chronology was not difficult; the interviews followed the sequence of the participant’s life.

Creswell notes that characters may be discussed as “archetypes or [portrayed] through their personalities, behaviors, styles, or patterns.” In this thesis, there is just a hint of archetypes: I entitle each narrative with a thematic subtitle (for example, my participant Jennifer’s story is entitled “The Woman Who Took Risks”) and let the reader look at the story through the lens of this title.

5. Coding for themes. What Creswell refers to as themes, in this thesis I call strategies for negotiating school (see Chapter 4). When I analyzed these stories, I sifted out these strategies or categories, a form of in vivo or structural coding. I included a table (see Chapter 4), which illustrates which participants’ stories contributed to each particular approach. Creswell discusses a “small set of themes, such as five to seven” (2012, p.511). In this study, I have identified 18 strategies within eight categories. These constitute the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data. The strategies ranged from zero school negotiation to the most radical,
unschooling. In Chapter 3, The School Negotiators, headings such as Connections, Background, and Negotiating School emerged as structural codes.

6. **Context or setting.** As Creswell suggests, the setting or context of my participants’ stories provides rich detail of each participant’s personal experiences (2012, p. 512). Each participant’s context includes her own childhood and school life, as well as the family and school life she negotiated for her children. Other contexts included homes, automobiles, and parks where they passed time. The list goes on. The settings vary greatly from participant to participant, as each went to school in different times, be they the 1940s or the 1980s, and different places, such as Ireland or Canada. The participants’ children, however, were all schooled in the urban environment of the Greater Toronto Area. I do not begin with any particular description of settings; they are apparent within the story.

The context conforms to Connelly and Clandinin’s three-dimensional space narrative structure (2000) of interaction, continuity, and situation. They involve an interaction between the personal, where the participant looks inward, and the social, where the participant looks outward. They involve continuity, which includes the past, present, and future. And they involve situation, both time and place.

7. **Collaborating with participants.** In narrative inquiry, the researcher works hard to develop a relationship with the participant. As Clandinin and Connelly note (2000), the researcher wishes to mitigate the possible gap between the narrative the participant tells and the narrative that the researcher writes. Or, as Creswell explains, “collaboration in narrative research means that the inquirer actively involves the participant in the inquiry as it unfolds” (2012, p. 512).

Other narrative inquiry researchers have to begin at an introductory level; they have to identify and gain access to their participants. In this study, some participants I have known for 30 years or more, while the shortest relationship is at least a decade old. We have already established trust through a long-lasting personal friendship. That friendship is the foundation upon which we went forward with this researcher-participant collaboration.

**The Participants**

First, I compared the narratives of schooling of my own family to those of my seven participants. With five of my participants my family negotiated school simultaneously. For example, when my family left the alternative school to homeschool for Grade 1, so did Lara’s family. Two others, whose children were too old to be Liam’s playmates, influenced my school negotiating with their stories.
This is a thumbnail sketch of the stories of my participants: Allan’s son could not figure out school so Allan transferred him many times; Mario and Paulina moved their children from school to school often, hoping to give them a more prestigious education; Anna had a crisis with her first child and made safety for her second child, Paul, her top priority; Robert chose the same alternative public school as we did and kept his children there; Lara’s oldest child also attended before she went homeschooling with us. Jennifer, with her husband and several colleagues, founded the Sudbury Valley School, written about above; Alexandra and her ex-husband co-parented their boy, Jamie, who is identified as learning disabled and spent the first term of Grade 2 in a treatment centre for behaviour issues.

I find eight different paths in the road (including mine) for eight different participants. This inquiry makes no claims to generalizability; nevertheless, the negotiations we made for our children seem to cover the map of possible choices parents can make when attempting to custom-fit schooling to their child. Therefore, I venture to make a continuum of options for school negotiations in Chapter 4.

**Identity protection.** Pseudonyms are used throughout the participants’ stories, but not in my story until Liam was three and a half and the study began. I then changed the name of the neighbourhood we had moved to and the schools Liam attended to avoid leaving clues as to my participants’ identities. For my participants, I renamed the schools and neighbourhoods, sometimes using fictional names and other times real names taken from another geographic location.

**Informal conversations.** Since my participants were my friends, we often had informal discussions about school, which sometimes revealed new information not covered in the formal interviews. Sometimes Veronica, with her expert knowledge of special education, would join in, offering insights that might not have emerged otherwise.

When sitting down to restory and finding gaps in the transcript, I would make a simple phone call and fill in the blanks.

**Participants and minor characters.** Veronica’s story is recorded in brief. The participants’ spouses, and sometimes their first children, had stories that came out in the participant’s narrative. When my participants had more than one child, the inquiry tended to emphasize one child, often the younger one, or the one that was Liam’s friend. Two minor characters were Sally, who I knew and who took distance education as a secondary school student, and Henry, a friend of Lara and me who unschooled his five daughters.
The evolving interview. When the interviews began, I intended to ask my participants questions regarding their strategies for negotiating their children’s schooling. When I launched my first interview, however, Allan and I immediately began talking about his life story. I realized that this was the way to go. The decisions made by the school negotiators’ parents influenced their school negotiations. Once you know a person’s life story, you know the context for the decisions that he made (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Narrative inquiry is more than just a question and answer session. The researcher listens to his intuition, adapts, and makes adjustments. The interview plan evolves.

Practical Research Methods

Collecting the data. The data included conversations (unstructured interviews with some essential questions), collaboratively written webs, and telephone calls. Some of the prepared prompts were: “Tell me your story,” “Describe how you have adapted schooling to fit your child,” “What are the benefits you hope to achieve?”, “What are the obstacles to your program of schooling?”, “What educational philosophy or beliefs guide your child’s schooling?” Of course these questions evolved, and not all of the prompts were used. What occurred from the first interview with Allan was the background story provoked by the prompt, “Tell me about yourself” (Benjamin, 1981).

I recorded the conversations in web format (see below) on large ledger paper, so that both my participant and I could see the development of the conversation. I kept audiotape recordings as well, which I later transcribed. Follow-up clarification took place in another meeting or over the telephone. I conducted three interviews of two hours duration with each participant. The first two sessions led to a research text, and the last session served to review, edit, and augment. My pilot study had already tested these methods. I analyzed the stories by inquiring, with the participants, into their meanings, comparing their narratives with those of others to find common themes, and relating these themes to the literature.

Collaboratively written webs. A web consisted of essential notes, encircled and connected together by lines. I wrote these in large print on ledger paper so that the participant could see the idea, compare it to the next concept, and sometimes, when feeling animated, take the pen to make additions or changes. “The trial web itself shows little concern with particular features. But when you begin to write, the broad vista of the trial web takes on substance as you work down into details and then back up toward a modified and richly expanded whole.” (Rico, 1983, p. 89)
Collaboratively written webs allowed my participants to have a greater voice in telling their stories, and allowed me to gather more detail and interact with my participants so that I could inquire more deeply into the meaning of their narratives. In *How to Make Meetings Work*, Doyle and Straus (1976) stress the importance of collective memory, stating that “meetings are very rich in information. In the first ten minutes, hundreds of facts and figures may be brought up. Without some kind of collective memory, it is very easy to come down with a case of data overload” (p. 41). And so I have used these collaboratively written webs as a form of group memory.

**Ongoing conversations.** Many research methods may regard using friends as participants as a problem. However, in this study it was an asset. If I had questions for my participants regarding their family, their history, or their children’s education, I could ask them casually in an ongoing fashion and without worry. Sometimes, in catching up with my participants and their families, I would learn something relevant to the thesis and would update their stories. These ongoing conversations made this study possible and allowed me to keep apprised of my participants’ stories without the need for more formal interviews.

**The Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of five chapters. In Chapter 1, the introduction, I explain my purpose, how I originally came to discover the concept of school negotiating and became a school negotiator myself. In Chapter 2, this methodology section, I include why I chose to use narrative inquiry as my methodology, how my study was conducted, and what unique features can be found in this thesis.

In Chapter 3, I tell my participants’ stories (and mine as well). These stories begin with an introduction, and their connection to my life. I begin the narratives by starting with the participants’ childhood and detailing their family and school history, which informed how they eventually negotiate school for their children. I then tell the story of the participants’ journeys as school negotiators. After each narrative I attempt to construct meaning from the participant’s story in a section entitled Reflections. These reflections emulate the short paragraph essays by essayists such as Montaigne or Bacon, and try to briefly capture a specific insight.

In Chapter 4, I present the negotiating school strategies, distilled from the participants’ narratives. I begin by defining each concept, using both dictionaries of educational terms and my own meanings. I then briefly list which participants used that particular strategy, along with a short summary of their relevant stories. For each strategy I put forth a Discussion which includes generalizations based on the participants’ experiences and the scholarly literature.
Lastly, in Chapter 5, I state the findings and implications of this study. I share potential opportunities for further research based on what I discovered in this thesis, as well as limitations of this study. Finally I go over the advantages and disadvantages that I identified in my methodology and conclude my findings.

**Sifting out the Strategies from the Stories**

When it came to the strategies, I started by identifying the two ends of the spectrum: on the moderate end was zero or minimal school negotiation, where the parent leaves the child to the institution of school and makes little to no attempt to influence the child’s schooling; on the radical end was unschooling, where the parent avoids any sort of institutional, formal, organized schooling in favour of letting the child learn on his own terms. Between these two lie numerous other strategies, a chart for which can be found at the beginning of Chapter 4. While I make no claim to a complete list of all possible strategies, it is difficult to imagine any others.

Originally I had only one special education strategy. Upon reflection, I decided that special education merited two: special education for remediation, and special education for enrichment. Parents tend to see giftedness as an advantage, and all other special needs designations as a misfortune.

Certain experiences could fit more than one strategy: for example, close communication and advocacy. I eventually came up with a distinction: close communication meant staying in close contact with the school in a supportive, agreeable way, whereas advocacy involved asking the teacher or principal to do something different to serve one’s child.

As I honed these definitions, it became clear where the belonged on the continuum of school negotiation.

**Features of This Study**

**Evolving strategies.** With homeschooling, deeper analysis and research led me to conclude that Anna, Lara, Jennifer, and I were providing something else in addition to organized teaching and subject matter in the home. That something else was unschooling (supporting the child’s own interests) without giving extrinsic subject matter. The literature suggested that unschooling was as different from schooling at home as it was from institutional schooling.

To complete the logic of the continuum, I needed stories of people who used these strategies. I decided to look at the stories my participants’ and I had heard within our social circles. I recalled the story of Henry, who exemplified unschooling, and Sally, who relied on distance education. These narratives had limitations: I could not interact with the teller, or probe, but still such stories were helpful to a discussion of distance education and unschooling.
They met Connelly and Clandinin’s criteria of apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability (1990, p. 7).

**A longitudinal study.** This thesis has some of the features of a longitudinal study, defined here as: “any social or developmental research involving collection of data from the same individuals (or groups) across time” (Bynner, 2006, p. 165). Since this thesis took 12 years to complete, I had an opportunity to see how certain parental decisions played out over time. Years before the proposal, two of my participants and I spent many an evening discussing the problems of parenting and school. I constantly gathered stories. After the three formal interviews, my seven participants and I continued telling and retelling our schooling stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990, 1992; Clandinin, 2007).

**Motivated participants.** Some specialized, academic studies fail to engage the participant at a fundamental, personal level. Participants may sign on for money, altruism, or the love of research. This inquiry, however, concerns a parent’s love for her child; it is primal. Each of my participants, whether they took minor or radical steps, cared deeply about the concerns of this inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (2000, p.71-72) discuss the importance of negotiating relationships and trust with participants who usually have no past connection with the researcher. *Negotiating School*, however, begins with friendship, trust, and a common goal of working out how to educate one’s child.

**Similar methodologies.** Although firmly planted in narrative inquiry, *Negotiating School* shares boundaries (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 38) with three other methodologies: action research, self-study, and life stories.

Concerning action research, “Pushor and Clandinin argue that the interrelationship between action research and narrative inquiry is that the research ‘results in action or change in the practices of individual researchers, participants, and institutional practices’ (2009, 290)” (Caine, 2010). Conversations with my participants often triggered actions. For example, in Alexandra’s tale, taking part in the study resulted in satisfactory resolutions of conflicts with her child’s teacher and principal.

In *Negotiating School*, my story shows similarities to a self study. “The marvelous insight provided by self-study work, that we can interpret and re-interpret our own experience across time and situation, has freed me to be something other than a character in a family story or a story of someone else’s view of me” (Shields, Novak, Marshall, & Guiney Yallop, 2011). During the homeschooling period of Liam’s Grade 1, I favoured arguments against school as institution (Gatto, 2002; Greenberg, 1995; Holt, 1981; Neill, 1960). After exploring
homeschooling and free schooling situations, I concluded that public education provided more stimulation than these parent-driven situations: these alternatives were not for Liam, Veronica, and me. Intensive introspection and self-study enabled me to switch positions.

Finally, I collected each participant’s life story. “The life story offers a way, perhaps more than any other, for another to step inside the personal world of the storyteller and discover larger worlds” (Atkinson, 2007, p. 224). The life story interview brings forth “the voice and spirit within a life-as-a-whole personal narrative” (Atkinson, 2007, p. 224). Negotiating School would have been shorter if I had simply inquired into two or three incidents that concerned only my participants’ experience of schooling. But I would have lacked the thick description and context I wanted (Geertz, 1977). That information showed me how one’s personal practical knowledge influences how one negotiates school (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988).

Summary

In this methodology chapter, I have shown why and how narrative inquiry is particularly suitable to exploring the subject of negotiating school. I have shown how it worked well in my pilot study, and I have checked Negotiating School against a paradigm for narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2012). I have discussed the participants, the collection of stories, the structure of the thesis, and the study’s unique features. I have noted how this thesis shares its boundaries with three other methodologies: action research, self-study, and life stories.
Chapter Three: The School Negotiators

Will: The Man Who Tried Many School Negotiating Strategies

Introduction

Between the two of us, Veronica and I had spent some 42 years schooling other people’s children before having a child of our own. We had conducted more than 100 parent-teacher interviews where we had advised parents without ever having been parents ourselves. Not until our dear son entered junior kindergarten did we realize how difficult it can be for parents to surrender their child to the institution of school. For Liam we moved house to find a better-rated school and a child-friendly neighbourhood. We thought that moving would be our only school negotiation, but traditional schooling thrust problems in our way so that, for a time, we withdrew to the world of homeschooling and alternative schooling, where we engaged with many others who took extreme measures to adapt school to fit their children.

Connection

I met Veronica in 1977 and we married in 1982. Liam was born in 1995 when I was 48 and Veronica 42. Allan and Mario I met more than 30 years ago. They had their children some years before us and over the years provided me with schooling and parenting stories which gave me lessons for when Liam came along. The remaining five participants were our contemporaries; our children became playmates and we parents became supportive friends.

Background

Family life. My father, Bill, was born in 1904, in Winnipeg, where his father Frank ran a tavern. My father’s mother was a strict Victorian who lived to be 96. Bill achieved his high school matriculation, which at that time equalled today’s BA. First he worked for the bank, then the railway, where he was employed until early retirement at age 60.

My mother, Shelagh, was born in 1914 either in Ireland, in Montreal, or on the boat over. My grandmother was a single parent who raised my mother by cleaning houses. To my grandmother’s dismay, my mother quit school at age 14 to go to work. Shelagh gave birth to my sister Patricia in 1933 before meeting my father.

They met while Bill was working at the bank in Montreal. They dated, married, and Bill adopted Patricia. Five years later, my brother Frank was born. When Frank was little the family lived in northern Quebec in Val D’Or. The CNR provided a caboose which served as their home. Next they moved to Toronto.
I was born in a small maternity hospital down the street from where we lived near High Park. Children were not permitted to visit, so Frank climbed up a tree beside the hospital to see his mother and little brother. At the time Frank was 8 and Patricia was 13. She was a very giggly sister who taught me how to write my name, bought big band records, and took me to the movies. My brother Frank was the black sheep of the family who the police sometimes brought home. Later in life he spent much time in prison.

Our house on Glendonwynne Avenue was a duplex where we first rented and later bought. Down the street was the mineral baths swimming pool with its 33-foot diving tower. Frank became a daring diver. He and I shared a room and slept on bunks. My brother would put me on the handlebars on his bike and we would roll down the hills of High Park at terrifying speeds. My friends and I would climb trees and play Tarzan. We would shoot arrows into the sky, lie down, and dodge them when they descended. Milk was delivered to the house by horse. We would throw horse manure at each other. Before school, life on the street was wild and free.

**Schooling.** Patricia and Frank went to St. Cecilia’s Catholic School. I, however, attended Annette Street Public School because at the time the public school had kindergarten while the Catholic school did not. Every Thursday after school I walked over to St. Cecilia’s for catechism classes, but because my school friends were Protestant I hid this from them.

In the summer of 1954, my parents sold their duplex and moved west to The Kingsway to rent an apartment. In the 50s, middle-class Torontonians longed to move to the suburbs. By September 20, my birthday, I had made many friends from Humber Valley Village Public School who came to my birthday party. Our Grade 3 teacher was kind and I was a good student. At the Christmas reporting time I remember how upset my good friend Peter was when I received As and he Ds. He found it baffling. After six months of apartment living, we moved further west to Islington and bought a bungalow where I attended my first Catholic school, Our Lady of Peace.

Whereas Humber Valley Village left me with pleasant memories, my next school, Our Lady of Peace, was harsh. The lessons were easy but I chafed at the rigid controls of the 1953-1960 Catholic elementary schools. The children were expected to sit in silence, row on row, threatened by the strap. The endless grammar, spelling, and arithmetic were life killing and mind numbing.

In Grade 7 and 8 I competed with Anthony Lastrada to see which of us would receive top marks in the class. At the same time, I competed with Keith Humble to see which of us would get strapped the most.
My life at Michael Power Catholic Secondary School told a different tale, a story of camaraderie and scholarship. At this all-boys private school, I recall fondly a community of dedicated and learned priest-educators. Three or four of these men inspired original thought, particularly my Grade 11 English teacher, Father Paul Speck. That school also served as a refuge from a family life dominated by alcohol and marital warfare. There I was recognized and appreciated for being a student of the scholarship class, editor of the school newspaper, and member of the student council. I had gained popularity by giving comic speeches to full school assemblies. In 1964 my parents, without explanation, decided to move from our bungalow on Islington to an apartment on Keele Street, near Lawrence. The commute to Michael Power was horrific, so I transferred to York Memorial, a co-educational public secondary school where I was lonely and very shy of girls. When I left Michael Power, my alternative family, I felt stranded.

At Christmas break that year I hitchhiked to Montreal with a 22-year-old, more worldly friend from France. Somehow that triggered what R. D. Laing termed a psychotic voyage (1983), and the Native Americans considered a vision quest; a mystical journey to be expected in late adolescence. However, Western psychiatry saw things differently, prescribing a two-month stay in a psychiatric ward using ECT, one of its “more ghastly therapies” (Lindner, 1971). I was lucky to get out of there in time to complete my Grade 13 year with only a 15% drop in grades. Back then 68% was sufficient to get into any university in Ontario.

Upon graduating, I left Toronto and attended Assumption University at Windsor. There I chose from a palette of liberal arts courses in English, philosophy, psychology, drama, theology, history, and art, and followed a curriculum of knowledge for its own sake without concern for training for a future career. Many courses, such as social psychology, were taught by bright, gifted professors who gave us key ideas that have served me well over my adult life.

**Family alcoholism.** My mother, Shelagh, was a mean alcoholic who awoke at about 2:00 p.m. and was drunk by supper. She enjoyed torturing my father through verbal abuse and he would sometimes hit her. For an image from literature to describe her I use Rochester’s wife, the mad woman in the attic who prevents his bigamous marriage to Jane Eyre. Shelagh, like Mrs. Rochester, set fire to a place or two; drunkards should not smoke in bed.

Bill, who at that time held a high-middle income position as a real-estate inspector with the CNR, had two defences against Shelagh: moonlighting as a taxi-driver or getting drunk himself. Whereas Shelagh drank constantly, Bill abstained for months at a time but would then
go on a three- or four-week bender. His disappearances, he once told me, were solitary. He had no girlfriends. He would pass time in all-day movie houses.

When I was five, Pat married. When I was 10, Frank left home. They, too, became hopeless alcoholics. For eight years I was alone with Shelagh and Bill’s drinking and fighting. Eventually, they all died. My father killed himself by taking pills and alcohol when I was in my third-year of university, in 1968. My mother died of esophageal cancer in 1974. Frank jumped off the Bloor viaduct in 1978. Pat also killed herself through pills and alcohol in 1983.

A year off. After graduating from university in the spring of 1968, I felt lost. I returned to Toronto but my father had died and my mother was in a nursing home after her stroke. My sister lived in Baie-Comeau, Quebec, my brother was in prison, and I had trained for no particular career.

I started work by driving cab, as my father had done, and came across fellow cabbie Rudy Jones, who I knew from university. We found a shared accommodation in the Yorkville area where I stayed for the next year or so. In addition to cab driving, I worked as a surveyor for the CNR in the summer and, in the fall, took up occasional teaching with the Catholic school board.

While in Yorkville, I made connections and heard of a psychotherapeutic community, known as Therafields, which eventually became the largest commune in North America with some 1,000 members. Realizing that I needed to find my way in life, and wanting to explore psychoanalysis, I decided to join the community to begin my journey of self-discovery through psychotherapy.

Therafields. At Therafields I lived in various communal houses over the next 10 years. I explored my troubled past through individual sessions, group therapy, and the occasional weekend-long group therapy marathon. I endeavoured to become a psychotherapist and later assisted in leading psychodramas, abreactive projects, the work group, and the parent group. I also coordinated a number of apprentice therapists who operated a help line for clients in distress.

Besides the therapeutic element, I benefited from the social milieu. Therafields included several farms in the Caledon Hills, two houses in Florida, and a centre on Dupont Street with its own restaurant, Vivaxis. The restaurant had a stage where the poet B. P. Nichol, critic Phil Marchand, actresses Beth Ann Cole and Wendy Thatcher, myself, and many others would write and perform comedy and drama. At the farm on Saturday nights, Greg Nye would host a dance
in the loft. Veronica and I fell in love there on warm summer nights by the pond in the moonlight.

Therafields was counselling, primal scream, and a healing place for me that abruptly shrank as a large number of us who had participated since before 1970 were suddenly ready in 1980 to marry, buy houses, and have children. This natural eventuality was marred by the coincident psychological breakdown of Lea Hindley Smith, the charismatic lay psychotherapist and originator of this community, who trained ex-priests, nuns, and others to become psychotherapists. Her breakdown at age 70, whether caused by diabetes, Alzheimer’s, or contradictions and lies in her own life, broke a spell for us all. The heroine had fallen from her pedestal. None of us were immune to the vicissitudes of life or safe from breakdown. The full story is written in Grant Goodbrand’s *Therafields* (2010).

**Teaching.** I taught mainly in the elementary school from 1968 to 2000, while teaching English at night school. I am proud of my work as the teacher of the library resource centre for four schools where I introduced stimulating programs and events. I am pleased with my six years as a curriculum consultant serving fifty schools in North York, where I was known as an innovator of imaginative programs, particularly spoken arts. At the same time I feel I did good work from 1996 to 2006 as principal of the International Languages Secondary School, which gave students the chance to earn credits through continuing education.

My first eight years of teaching, however, when I worked as a classroom teacher for Grades 4 to 8, involved much routine, class control, and keeping the students busy. Peak teaching moments rarely occurred. Later, from my vantage as a curriculum consultant, I observed other classroom teachers struggling to create an outstanding program. It can be difficult. An elementary school teacher is one adult attempting to manage the social, emotional, cognitive lives of 30 children while preparing, teaching, and evaluating the 10 subjects the homeroom teacher covered in the Catholic system.

Up until 1980, teaching paid the rent while I worked to become a psychotherapist. I involved myself with my students but had no ambitions within the school system. In 1980, however, when Therafields collapsed, I resolved to transfer the insights, passion, and skills I acquired there to my teaching career. That year I took a sabbatical to begin my MA (T) English, Part 1 Special Education, and Part 1 Teacher Librarian courses. In September 1981, James Kelly, my supervisory officer gave me a one-term placement as a teacher-librarian. In January 1982, he recommended me as teacher-librarian to Sister Bonita, the principal at St. Benedict’s. There I redesigned the library, introduced young authors’ conferences, launched an enrichment
program, chaired staff meetings, wrote and directed school theatre, and launched the Artist in the School program.

That year I became friends with my new supervisory officer, Peter Kramer, an idea person. I proposed to him that in his superintendency we start a drama teachers’ association and a teacher think tank, which we did, and which I coordinated for two years. In 1985, I transferred to Our Lady of the Annunciation and became chairperson of the North York Teacher Librarians’ Association. Through 1988 and 1989 James Kelly was my supervisory officer again. He asked me to work with Andrew Johnson, his primary/junior resource teacher, and organize a Spoken Arts Festival.

By 1986 I had my principal’s papers, by 1987 my supervisory officer’s certificate, and that year I began a career in summer schools as a continuing education principal. I applied for everything. I had no success with the vice-principal short list but made three resource teacher short lists: drama, library, and intermediate. In June of 1989, Kelly placed me as an intermediate resource teacher for the fifty schools of the North York district.

He introduced me to my new colleagues as an idea person. The Spoken Arts project that I began with Andrew Johnson as teacher librarian we continued. In 1990 we held three teacher inservices, beginning with one given by David Booth, and we coordinated three children’s festivals for three superintendencies. In 1992 the project expanded, with one superintendency holding 11 festivals that included speech-making, poetry, performing, storytelling, debate, town hall meetings, soap box speaking, and comedy. We linked our Spoken Arts project to Booth’s Talk Project in the Peel District School Board (Booth & Thornley-Hall, 1992).

In June 1995, I completed a six-year term as a consultant but again did not make the vice-principal short list, which could have led to full-time principalship. That hurt, but I was given the position in continuing education as the principal of the Don Bosco International Languages School, which held classes on Saturday mornings. I held that position for 10 years, which satisfied my desire to be principal. For day school I returned to the classroom to teach Grades 7 and 8 for one year and then took a teacher-librarian position for my last three years.

**Veronica.** Veronica’s parents met in England during the war. Czeslaw had escaped from Poland and then served with the Polish Air Force on Lancaster bombers. Margaret was 18 and was attending a dance in the town where the base was located. After several dates he asked her if she would like to dance with him for the rest of their lives. They moved to Argentina, married, had two children (Veronica and Nick), and Czes took work as a mechanic in the Argentine Air Force. When Veronica was two and a half, Peron’s Argentina became too dangerous and they
moved to Toronto. They bought and sold a succession of houses in New Toronto, Markland Woods, and Etobicoke. Margaret worked as a bookkeeper while Czes worked as an airplane propeller mechanic.

Veronica went to St. Teresa, where she skipped Grade 3 and rose to the top of her class. She loved school, but unfortunately lived in a neighbourhood where many of her fellow students hated it, spent time in reform school, and drove to Buffalo on weekends to drink. And so she had few social connections at St. Teresa. The family next moved to Markland Woods and then Etobicoke. Veronica minded her little brother after school and during holidays. When she was 17 her sister Sarah was born, and she helped take care of the baby. She went to St. Joseph’s secondary school for girls and won an Ontario scholarship to go to university.

Veronica commuted to the University of Toronto, where she majored in classics. In one of her summer employments she worked with developmentally-delayed adults. There she discovered her passion, working in special education. After university, Veronica took work at the university as an administrative assistant, and took psychotherapy at Therafields, where we met. In 1979 she returned to university to take a Bachelor of Education in business studies, but was hired the following year to teach ESL to Grades 7 and 8. She quickly acquired a specialist qualification in ESL and then turned to taking additional qualification in special education.

At that time, the Board opened classes for the “trainable retarded,” which was the term used by the Ministry of Education in 1982 for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities or developmental disabilities. Veronica started the first such pre-primary class in the TCDSB when the Ministry closed the Metropolitan Toronto School Board.

She next moved to a class for the developmentally handicapped. These six students, ranging in age from 9 to 21, were so challenged that they spent most of their time in wheelchairs. Before Veronica, they were simply minded. Veronica introduced a special education program for them, tailored to their needs.

After two years there, and a year before the Board closed the class, Veronica transferred to the total communication program for students with severe language impairments. Here she introduced augmentative and alternative communication systems (such as signed English, photographs, pictures, line drawing, Blissymbols and themeboards). Before the Internet, she convinced the superintendent to pay for a dedicated telephone line, which allowed her students to communicate with other students in other classes and locations. She connected with a child psychiatrist for children with disabilities at the Hospital for Sick Children, Dr. Arlette Lefebre who was trialling ways for her child-patients to be able to mix socially in non-threatening ways.
Next, she turned to teaching students with autism who had very serious maladaptive behaviours and were very aggressive. In an arrangement through the combined services of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Services, she worked as teacher with three youth workers and other professionals from Thistletown Treatment Centre.

Afterwards, she became an assessment and programming teacher with the TCDSB for a special education consulting and testing role to support regular schools. At first she served the general population of special education students, but later she specialized in the Board’s behaviour classes as part of the Central Behaviour Team. During her teaching career, she continued professional learning. She took additional qualifications courses, including specialists in ESL, special education, and religious education. She earned a Masters of Education at Brock and later a PhD at OISE/UT.

Liam. Liam was born September 4, 1995. I taught Grade 7 and 8 during that first year while Veronica took maternity leave. Veronica joined the La Leche League and became very committed to its principles as well as Dr. Sears’ theory of attachment parenting with its family bed (1993).

When school ended that first year I teamed up with Veronica to help with Liam, now 10 months old. I would get up with him at 6:00 a.m. to give her some extra sleep, and we would take morning walks to watch squirrels, put our hands in puddles, and sniff flowers.

When Liam was one year old, the Board gave both Veronica and me a paid sabbatical. We had both been accepted into the doctoral program at OISE, which required a year of residency. I took courses, reflected, and meditated. Since our course work was at the end of the week, Veronica, Liam, and I took long weekends in September at our cottage in Muskoka. No other cottagers were there then and the fall was warm and beautiful. We both wanted to spend as much time with Liam as we could, so for the next three years we worked half-time; I worked in the morning, Veronica worked in the afternoon.

Negotiating School

Preschool. Veronica ran activities for Liam in the mornings, like a preschool teacher would. She used a water table, played with puppets, and read him many books. In the afternoon I took him on trips to see construction sites, and to Hillcrest Park to make friends. There we met other parents and their children. We patched together a small community of playmates for him, but they were never enough. Finding playmates was hard work as most children went to daycare.
Because our house in the Hillcrest Village neighbourhood was mostly professional, with few children on the street, we decided to move to a more family-oriented neighbourhood in south Etobicoke. The local Catholic school there had been rated in the ninetieth percentile in EQAO school rankings, which seemed important at the time. (The school at Bathurst and St. Clair scored in the tenth percentile.)

**JK at St. Demetrius.** On September 4, 1999, my little boy turned 4. The next day he walked with his mother to St. Demetrius to start kindergarten, full of expectation. We were naive. We had assumed that Veronica could volunteer in the class, but the teacher wanted no such thing. It mattered not that she was a special education consultant with expert help to give. Liam was very attached to us, as we were to him. Every day when Veronica left, he burst into tears and was miserable for the full two and a half hours. After 10 days, we quit kindergarten.

We became JK homeschoolers. Ever since Liam was a toddler we had a policy of following his lead. He became a very articulate, independent 4-year-old. When his godfather asked him if he would attend senior kindergarten, he replied, “I haven’t made my decision yet.”

Fortunately for his social life, a good friend was also homeschooling his son. This father and son wanted company and visited us twice a week. His friend on the street came some afternoons after morning kindergarten. But Liam’s play day really began when the older kids got out of school. It was a somewhat lonely time for him, but we did our best to find him friends.

**Homeschooling for JK.** For JK, Liam’s homeschooling could be considered unschooling because he had no formal, externally-imposed subject matter. Instead, we followed his lead. He was enthralled by knights, swords, and battles. Veronica read to him tales from the Arthurian legends. They used his stuffed animals to create stories and dramas that they acted out for hours. What made this activity so much like unschooling is that Liam initiated the learning, while Veronica merely facilitated it.

Veronica also developed his numeracy skills through his interest in traditional card games, as well as Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh cards. For science, they made Lego structures, model castles, and train sets. For my part, I worked to supplement the social life he was missing in the institutional school by organizing for him a network of friends to visit and play with, while Veronica ensured that he was prepared to re-enter school, which he did when he joined SK.

Veronica’s homeschooling could also be seen as schooling at home. Like a regular kindergarten program, it covered reading aloud, storytelling, dramatic play, puppet theatre,
building with Lego, painting, and numerous board and card games. She covered the subjects of language arts, science, mathematics, and the arts.

**Lakeshore Alternative School.** We had assumed we would return to St. Demetrius for SK, but one day I noticed a sign advertising an alternative public school, Lakeshore Alternative School (LAS), and stopped to fill out an application. Normally these alternative public schools have long waiting lists. But, because of new government fiscal policy, underused schools needed to enrol more students; LAS needed 40 more, and so we were accepted immediately.

Many of the parents at LAS were like us; they wanted to stay in the JK/SK classroom with their children for the morning. Suddenly we had a community of friends and families that we could visit after school. These parents, like me, cared less about kindergarten programming than about their children having a band of playmates.

I volunteered in class every day, joined the school council, ran a project to gain charitable status for the council’s fundraising, and even ran for president for the following year (unsuccessfully). LAS had only two teachers that fit the alternative school mandate: work with the parents. The SK teacher worked hard at her professional kindergarten program, which we parents mainly ignored. She arrived one year and left the next.

LAS had special needs students who received no focused attention to their exceptionalities. Some had serious behaviour problems, and one was autistic. Having discouraged and disengaged students played havoc with the discipline and good order of classrooms. Often there were tense clashes between parents and teachers.

**Leaving LAS.** We intended Liam to continue at LAS. During those first few days of Grade 1, I volunteered in the classroom every day and found the teacher unprofessional, so Veronica and I decided to withdraw him. Our friend Lara withdrew her children at the same time for similar reasons.

We considered sending Liam a private school, the Springfield school. Our friends however, whose son attended there, told us that it was autocratic. We had also heard other negative reports of private schools. For instance, another friend claimed that one prestigious private school’s guidance department was vastly inferior to the local collegiate’s. Another school fired a first-year teacher for questioning the principal’s direction to raise the marks of the son of a rich donor. The final account came from a friend, a recently certified teacher, who worked very long hours but was paid just twelve dollars an hour. We also decided against that school because of the long distance from home to school. For me a split between the school and the neighbourhood friendship group would have been miseducative.
The Waldorf School also seemed promising. The school boasted an arts-based curriculum that taught drama, music, and crafts. Again we rejected it, also for its cost and distance, but also for its philosophical framework, what its founder Rudolf Steiner termed “anthroposophy,” which did not reflect our own beliefs (Nicol & Taplin, 2012, p. 4).

The Sudbury Valley School philosophy emphasizes subject matter directed by children’s interests. I sat on the founders’ committee for Jennifer’s Sudbury Valley School, but it was never a viable option because it would not open until Liam’s Grade 3 year and I could not see Liam doing another full year of homeschooling.

**Homeschooling.** In Grade 1, when Veronica returned to full-time work and I retired, I took charge of Liam’s homeschooling in the daytime. I attempted to keep up with language arts using a key word and key sentence method (Ashton-Warner, 1964). In this method, Liam would tell me a word that interested him and I would transcribe it so that he could see it in its written form and add it to a deck of key word cards which he could practice saying back to me. Every night, Veronica read to him for at least one hour from higher-level reading material, such as Harry Potter. And so, his spoken language showed a high vocabulary level.

My plan was to devote 90 minutes per day to formal instruction: handwriting, reading, and Grade 1 mathematics. My theory was that when you subtracted the line ups, recesses, and other routines of school, the essential subjects could be taught in 90 minutes. The material I presented often did not pique his interest, but I did not have the heart to force Liam to do what he did not want to do. I disliked taking on the role of instructor (Elkind, 1981). I remember him saying, “Why is there all this pressure coming from you people for me to learn to read?”

After the 90 minutes, or sometimes sooner, we would talk about philosophy, war, friendships, and what was going on in the world. We would go to the lake, go rock climbing, and play in the park. I intended to school with organized subject matter and direct instruction, but in the end that was not our priority; unstructured discussion and play came first. In the Huck Finn School for Boys Liam and I got to enjoy the father-son conversations without the interference of much formal schooling. We postponed the pressure of reading until Grade 2, as do modern European education systems (Elkind, 1987). I was assured that Liam would be all right because Veronica had given him several ability tests that showed scores in mathematics and language above the 95th percentile.

My fellow homeschooler Lara and I regularly took our children to the Williams community centre where other homeschoolers gathered. While Liam enjoyed the trip, playing
ball hockey in the gym, and swimming in their pool, this did not lead to any new friendships, nor any hope that Liam would find a social life as a homeschooler.

Homeschooling was never our family’s intended strategy, rather it happened because of the difficulty with the alternative school. We explored it with great curiosity, but did not have great results either in Liam’s learning or in his social life.

Although the literature divides homeschooling into schooling at home and unschooling, both Lara and I were hybrids. On one of our journeys we met Henry, who told us this story of his unschooling, which was somewhat discouraging:

**Henry’s unschooling story.** Henry told us his story of unschooling his five daughters both in the city and in the country. He and his wife encouraged activities that interested their children. The girls were fascinated by growing their own herbs and vegetables, learned how to take care of livestock, and even made some of their own tools thanks to Henry’s metalworking skills and building his own forge. They kept bees and studied the various species of mushrooms. Henry put up wall charts that outlined the history of the world. Two daughters showed artistic talent. They all made their own gifts and cards when a holiday or family birthday came around.

Unfortunately, this idyllic homeschool situation did not last. One would expect that buying a farm and moving to the country would augment the unschooling lifestyle, however living on the farm was isolating and lacked the stimulation the children enjoyed in the city with its events organized by homeschoolers, community centres, and libraries. And, as the bread winner working in Toronto, Henry now spent much time commuting to work. Marital discord arose, and the parents separated. Henry moved back to the city, his wife kept the farm, but they now had little time or energy for active unschooling, yet some children continued to stay home.

Each child entered school at around age 12. All of them generally disliked the way that school was “affecting them as persons.” Cliques and bullies were an issue they never faced at home. They showed a range of academic success, with one child doing well socially and academically, and another needing special education. Five years after the separation two children were still in school. Of the three adult children, one showed great initiative, partnering up with her boyfriend to buy a farm and raise horses. The other two seemed to be making poor choices. Henry felt disappointed. The rewards of unschooling cited in the literature such as resilience, initiative, self-direction (Van Gestel, N., Hunt, J., Quinn, D., Kream, R., Stevens, E., Houssenloge, K. . . Van Doren, M., 2008), seemed to be eluding his daughters.

**Liam’s diabetes.** On a trip to New Brunswick, Liam suddenly became too weak to walk and I had to carry him. He said to Veronica, “Mama, why am I peeing so much?” We thought
that he had the flu. On returning to Toronto, we took him to his pediatrician. She determined that his blood-sugar level was above 30, he was in a state of ketosis, and must have diabetes. She sent us to the emergency ward at Sick Children’s Hospital where he promptly vomited. The hospital immediately admitted him, and over the next several days the doctors and nurses gave the three of us lessons in blood-sugar monitoring, carbohydrate counting, and insulin injecting. At the time of this writing, Liam had been managing diabetes for 13 years.

**Investigating St. Demetrius in the last two weeks of Grade 1.** I wanted St. Demetrius to admit Liam to Grade 1 for the last two weeks of June and take me as a volunteer in the classroom. This was an unusual request, but my long association with the principal, Klara, made it possible.

Liam and I were daunted by the high academic expectations of Grade 1 at St. Demetrius. However, the social benefits were enormous. At the first recess, while I was sitting in the yard, out ran one of the boys from the class, Carl, who asked, “Where is Liam? I want to play with him.” Liam realized that he wanted to be part of a class, preferred to quit homeschooling, and needed to catch up on reading and writing. For us, those two weeks served as a test. We learned that Liam was ready to give up play and take up work in order to be part of this larger group of classmates that he met through full-time school. Our field trip into institutional schooling convinced us that attending full-time was best for Liam. We also met Phillip and his mother Anne, who came to our cottage that July and have remained family friends ever since. Long time friendships began that June and persisted through Liam’s secondary school and university.

**St. Demetrius, an introduction.** Much of our adventures were now over; we had returned to the traditional, academic school. Before writing about the experiences of each grade, here are some general themes of St. Demetrius: The school had a reputation for being strict, serious, and academically successful. The students there scored high on provincial tests. The school had a low population of about 200, which meant that, after the low pupil-teacher ratio of 20 to 1 in the primary grades, the remainder of the grades were combined, 4/5, 6/7, and 7/8. Because of some statistical anomaly, Liam’s cohort had a ratio of three boys to every girl. That was good news for Liam, because at his age playing with the boys was what mattered.

Over my seven years at St. Demetrius, I was actively involved in the school volunteering, communicating with teachers and principals and sometimes advocating for Liam. Our friend Anne took the opposite tack and exemplified noninterference. As a teacher of French in the colleges and universities, she appreciated the difficulties of teaching any class, never mind 30 elementary or secondary school students. She appreciated the values attributed to the
Catholic school. She did not complain, express disagreement, or intervene at school, no matter what went wrong.

**Liam’s health.** Because of diabetes, Liam had frequent absences. He had to attend diabetes clinic, but also absences that resulted from waking up with high blood sugar, which led to migraines. He also suffered from insomnia, often not falling asleep until after 2 a.m. Liam was prone to upper-respiratory infections: bronchitis, pneumonia, and frequent sinus infections. And finally, during the periods when Liam found formal schooling arduous, particularly in Grades 2 through 5, he and I sometimes took “mental health days.”

**Reading.** Veronica taught Liam to read during the summer before Grade 2. She used a program, lent to us by the Grade 1 teacher; essentially a banker’s box full of tiny, soft cover picture books. Each page consisted of a picture that advanced the story and a single line of text beneath it. Liam could almost guess the words from the picture clues. The stories were cartoonish and enjoyable. Veronica increased his motivation by paying him a dollar for every book he read. He never complained of being punished by these rewards (Kohn, 1993). Before we knew it, he could read well enough to cope in Grade 2 the following September. Nevertheless, Veronica had to continue teaching him every evening for the first term of that year.

**Principals of St. Demetrius.** In our time at St. Demetrius the school had four principals. Veronica and I knew them all: Linda was the principal when Liam was in JK for 10 days; Klara was principal through Grades 1 and 2; Christina for Liam’s Grade 3 to 6 years; Karen for Grade 7 and 8. Interestingly, while we addressed all of Liam’s teachers by their surnames, we addressed each of his principals by her given name.

I had known Linda from my days as a consultant. When I arrived at St. Demetrius Linda confided in me about the reconstruction of the playground and dealing with the parents, who had broken into warring factions. Although we had been colleagues in the past, it never occurred to me to ask for her help in allowing Veronica to sit in on Liam’s JK class.

Klara, who I had known as the gifted program coordinator, helped us in two crucial ways: when we needed to investigate St. Demetrius in Grade 1, she backed the idea; and when, in Grade 2, we opposed special education help, she supported us.

When Christina took over in Liam’s Grade 3 year she seemed energetic and decisive. Besides, she lived on the same street as Veronica’s brother, which gave us something in common. Later she disappointed, showing herself to us as impulsive, punitive, and unreflective.
Veronica, in her role as special education consultant, had worked with Karen at her previous school. Karen impressed us. On the first day of school, in the schoolyard lineup, she came over and introduced herself to Liam. She seemed to have a particular fondness for him. She said to Veronica later, “He’s an old soul.” Immediately she was very much on top of the problem of Liam being diabetic. She wanted to acquire information about his special needs. She quickly developed a chart in the office listing all the students with medical concerns such as peanut allergies, asthma, and diabetes.

**Grade 2.** I asked Ms. Sanders, Liam’s Grade 2 teacher, to let me volunteer in the class until Liam felt comfortable. She was horrified at the suggestion, so to stay close to Liam I volunteered to supervise the playground.

Ms. Sanders had returned to teaching after a 15-year absence. Although hired by Klara for her experience in social work, she lacked rapport with 7-year-olds, which led to friction with the parents. I never complained. I just listened to Liam’s stories about life in her classroom. He was shocked that his teacher could smile one moment and shout the next.

Ms. Sanders and Klara recommended Liam receive help from the special education teacher, which we opposed because we wanted to avoid a special education label. Veronica therefore tutored him two hours every night until Christmas. By the new year he had fallen in love with reading and by Grade 3 was reading Harry Potter novels. His handwriting remained difficult to read until he was taught cursive writing properly in Grade 6.

**Volunteering.** At LAS, I accompanied Liam every morning to SK and helped out as much as I could. Only two or three parent volunteers actually helped. Most observed and talked with one another.

Because I wanted to keep watch on Liam and have influence, I volunteered in many areas of St. Demetrius life besides school trips and special classroom events. I supervised the primary playground at lunch hour and both recesses through Liam’s Grades 2, 3, and part of 4, covering the principal’s 200 minutes of weekly supervision every day. By supervising every day, I became a familiar, respected parent.

In 2002, I joined the Catholic School Advisory Council (CSAC) with its 20 members: the principal, two teachers, and 17 parents. Of this group, 17 members were female and 3 were male. Here the Council brought its concerns and suggestions to the principal. Being an advisory council, it had no power except for allocating the funds it raised. Thus, the key committee of the CSAC was the fundraising committee. Typically the committee raised about $20,000 per year, a tidy sum. The principal would submit to CSAC requests taken from teachers, for example, one
teacher asked for a video camera. Certain expenses were traditional: such as the Grade 8 graduation. The Council also allotted each teacher a $200 petty cash allowance. Interestingly, the parents used their funding power to influence programs through incentive grants, such as the $500 excursion grant. Teachers that took excursions received the $500 support while those that never took the class out did not. The parents also funded a “Scientist in the School Program.” Thus the CSAC prodded staff into enriching the school’s programs.

Since I supervised the playground, I became a one-person committee promoting its maintenance. When my family first visited the yard at the fall fair of 1998, we had found freshly planted trees, tiered yards, and high-quality lighting, all of which was the work of that year’s CSAC playground committee, and involved raising $100,000 through fundraising and grants from the city. This action, however, had created tremendous conflicts and hurt between those who wanted to raise money and invest, and those who did not. The pro-renovation side wanted the children to have the best place to play, but the conservative side argued that CSAC could not afford to maintain such a yard. After such hard feelings, the whole community simply abandoned the school yard. No-one wanted to reopen the wounds from the conflict of 1998. I however, naively stepped in.

In the 2002-03 school year, the yard was in a shambles. The trees were dying, the bushes were dead, and the grassy field had been trampled. I interviewed landscapers, the head of the maintenance department, and several parents who had worked on that 1998 project. I drew up a report and made recommendations for maintaining the trees, staining the timbers, and completing the original design, which featured a climbing structure. As a first step, I targeted the primary section of the yard, which had deteriorated to mainly mud and gravel. In June 2003, CSAC committed to covering that section of the yard with wood chips at an expense of $1000. However, when the next year came and a new council took office, the new chairperson acted as if the previous year’s funding commitment no longer applied. After months of wrangling, the Council restored the funding and we laid down the ground cover. (Three years later another playground committee took up the wood chips, returning it to dirt.)

In my third year on the Council the Ministry provided funding to schools that could provide a well designed proposal for a school climbing structure. Suddenly, such a structure could be built for free. A whole new playground committee came into being for this purpose. As a member of that committee, I wanted the climbing structure but disagreed with the proposed location, the only area that the Grade 2 and 3 primary boys could play soccer. I suggested two other locations, but no other members of the council valued boys playing soccer. One teacher
complained of the aggressiveness of boys’ soccer. I argued that boys need to expend energy at recess, and that doing so near smaller children on a climber would be hazardous. In the end the structure went there. Two years later while shopping I ran into the teacher who disparaged boys’ soccer and, to her credit, she admitted that the staff had never succeeded at stopping the boys from playing soccer in and under that structure.

Another issue made me feel like an outsider. The principal had asked the council to recruit paid Catholic playground supervisors. I remarked that schools in high-needs neighbourhoods, with student populations of 500, regularly assigned just two teachers to the yard, a ratio of 1 to 250. I suggested that at St. Demetrius, a school of 200 well-behaved, students, one attentive, professional supervisor was sufficient. That simple change would have solved the supervision problem, but no-one in the room could imagine cutting supervision.

During my third year, I made a proposal to reform fundraising. The problem was that fundraising projects, such as selling Christmas wrapping to the families in the school, were labour intensive, not that profitable, and often irritating to the community. I made two suggestions. First, we could ask every family to simply donate $100 per year to the school, which had been the practice at LAS. With 100 families, that would raise $10,000 (or half of the fundraising committee’s typical yearly income) and eliminate the need for our most arduous fundraising events. Every family with the means would make this voluntary contribution.

The second reform had to do with providing tax receipts, which would encourage giving. The Board had a policy for receiving charitable donations, providing receipts, and holding the monies in an account for the school. However that mechanism worried school council parents because the funds could fall under the control of the principal rather than the Council. Several schools I knew of, both Catholic and public, had set up with the Canada Revenue Agency a body of the Council to which the CRA could grant charitable status. After researching this plan, consulting with CRA, and preparing an application, the Board informed us that it could not allow it.

After these frustrating endeavours, I left CSAC and felt relieved. Afterwards, my sense of humour returned and I told everyone I had completed my three-year term. Friends on the Council would tell me of the ongoing fights and dramas and I was thankful to be rid of the position. Instead of simply building rapport, volunteering embroiled me in conflicts which I took far too seriously.

Two other volunteers, Josephine and Michael, showed skill and success with council work without the conflicts and suffering that I experienced. Josephine was a highly-paid human
resources manager who was on parental leave, and chaired the fundraising committee successfully, winning the co-operation and appreciation of all the members. Michael, a CEO of a financial institution, came to the council not as a member, but as a parent with a serious fundraising plan worth $20,000 for that year, which would double that year’s fundraising total. His presentation and organization instantly swayed the group and his proposal passed immediately. Perhaps because of their management training they had the experience and skills needed to win over the council members.

**Grade 3.** Mr. Gibson in Grade 3 was a hard-working teacher. He coached many sports and the students, especially the boys, liked him. Without such a teacher in a school, many extracurricular activities would never happen.

Mr. Gibson was the first of Liam’s teachers with whom I felt I could become friends. Early in September I took him to lunch. We had a fine time talking about a professor we both knew, house renovations, and homeschooling.

However there were two instances where I felt I had to confront him. First, Liam’s absences had led to him having zero reward stars on the class behaviour chart while other students had up to 18. Mr. Gibson explained that on the days when everyone behaved well, he would tell all the students to put a star beside their names. I told him that Liam said he did not care about stars and suggested that such a reward system was as potentially harmful as it was encouraging. By the next school day Mr. Gibson had disposed of that chart.

Liam loved recess. However, Mr. Gibson kept him in to finish his work. Mr. Gibson and I had another tense conference; he said he wanted to help Liam finish his work. I answered that Liam’s favourite activity was recess and asked him to stop worrying: we would take care of the work at home. Mr. Gibson seemed hurt. After these two interactions my hopes for our friendly collaboration evaporated.

St. Demetrius had a reputation as a competitive, academic school. More than most schools, it wanted success for its Grade 3 students on the EQAO provincial tests. At that time, Liam’s handwriting was poor, which likely would have lowered his scores on the tests. The school requested that Liam use a scribe. He would tell his answers to a staff member who would then record them for him. Liam did not want to be singled out in this way and so we declined this offer.

**Grade 4.** After Mr. Gibson, with future teachers I felt a chill. I suspected that staffroom talk had me labelled as a “difficult parent.” Later that year the school tightened the rules for parents visiting the school: no longer could they drop in to their child’s classes. They had to sign
in, give a reason for their visit, and wear a visitor’s badge. It seemed obvious that teachers had complained about surprise visitors. A certain informality associated with a community school vanished.

Ms. Hy was a first-year teacher. In meeting her I told her my background and my interest in sharing views on education and participating in the class. She seemed open, but I never followed through. I came to the conclusion that such communication with a teacher could not have any positive effect.

During Grade 4, Liam cared little about schoolwork. He was there for the social life. I thought he needed a success to make him feel more confident. Liam knew everything about castles so, for his final social studies project, we built a castle that he designed. I taught him to saw wood into shapes, use a glue gun, and spray paint. But he was not interested in actually doing the work. The project became more mine than his, and an excellent model it was. I was annoyed that Ms. Hy gave it only an A- when other projects on display, obviously inferior, received an A+. I concluded that she suspected excessive parental involvement.

**Gifted testing.** In testing for the gifted program in Grade 4, Liam’s scored in the 96th percentile, close to being accepted. Veronica suggested we appeal on the grounds that his poor handwriting probably drew down his scores. However, after she consulted with her colleagues in special education, we decided that Liam could be a bright student without withdrawal to a special class in some other school. Also, while the children have the advantage of attending a stimulating, challenging program one day a week, the regular classroom teachers usually expect the gifted students to catch up on that day’s regular classroom work. As it was, Liam found school work tedious enough without taking on another day of it.

My experience as a teacher librarian, who implemented the Renzulli Enrichment Program (Renzulli & Reis, 1985) in 1985, supported our decision. That program involved selecting two or three of the brightest students in every Grades 6, 7, and 8 class, streamlining their regular programming, and withdrawing them to the library for lessons in higher-order thinking skills and presentations from professionals on subjects of special interest. Finally, they researched, wrote, and gave a presentation on a topic of interest. A beautiful program in theory, the children hated it. They resented being labelled “exceptional” and leaving their classmates.

Liam’s friend Phillip also scored in the high 90s on the gifted test. His mother Anne consulted Veronica about appealing it. Like so many parents she yearned to have her son designated gifted. But after Veronica explained all the downsides, she abandoned the pursuit.
**Grade 5.** Liam spent Grade 5 in a combined Grade 5/6 class. In late August of that following summer, my friend the school secretary let me know that Liam would be placed in the Grade 6 section of the next school year’s Grade 5/6 class. That class would have 24 Grade 5s, 6 Grade 6s, and the same teacher. I requested that he be placed in the Grade 6/7 class with its 18 Grade 6 students and the change was made.

In Liam’s Grade 5 year, one day, when the students were lined up to go in from recess, Joey, a Grade 6 student, slipped on the ice and tripped Liam. The teacher on duty sent both students to the office for fighting. Christina, the principal, refused to hear their story, the story of an accident. She said they were lying and sent them home with behaviour contracts, which required admitting their wrongs, describing how their behaviour was destructive, and stating how they would act in the future. We considered complying and having done with it. But it reminded me of show trials and so we refused. Joey’s father phoned to talk about it; he felt the same. The incident ended with Christina and me chatting in the yard. She said the teacher on duty was sure they were fighting. I responded: “I don’t believe the teacher, I believe Liam.”

**Grade 6.** Ms. Brown was professional, hardworking, and demanding. Liam liked that. She taught him to write legibly. He always spoke highly of her, even in Grade 12. But I had my concerns.

Early in the year, I sent Ms. Brown a note to ask for an extension on an assignment. Again, Liam was behind because of illness. Liam later reported that, upon receiving my note, while he was standing at her desk, she announced to the class, “Please don’t ask your parents to write me notes. You are now in Grade 6. You can ask me directly.” It was a bold move, and politically risky given that the parents at St. Demetrius were very proactive. From that day forward, Liam opposed any of my interventions.

Blocking my input was a bad idea; Ms. Brown held some indefensible notions. If a student was sick for a week, she required him to complete all of the five days’ assignments upon return, no matter how trivial they were. After that, Liam insisted on attending class when he was ill.

Nevertheless, Ms. Brown engaged him. She made Liam a “school guy” (a phrase used by my participant, Allan). After Ms. Brown, he cared about marks and doing excellent work.

**Grade 7.** Ms. Denova, a first year teacher, taught Grade 7/8. She was far more relaxed than most teachers at St. Demetrius. She liked adolescent students and got along with them well. She was not afraid of them. Liam and his friends talked of her fondly. They called her Ms. D. I felt comfortable talking to her. When Liam felt stress over a group project because the Grade 8s
on his team paid little attention to the task and dismissed his contributions, I emailed her, and she stepped in and made it right. For Liam’s sick periods she required only the most essential assignments. She did annoy me once when she accepted my offer to ask Liam’s godfather, a well-known author, to speak to the class, but then repeatedly changed the date of the event until we just gave up.

One wintery day, Liam came home with this story: for all of the afternoon recess, the principal had ordered all the students to stand against the fence while she lectured them about the proper way to line up after recess. A few had failed to line up correctly that morning, but 200 received punishment for it. Many who had expected to run during recess had left their coats inside and so stood shivering in the cold. Passersby gawked at this spectacle. When Liam told me of it, I rang her up to advise her that punishing the whole group for the actions of a few was unfair and harmful to her reputation. Liam understood my message: “We parents will speak out for you and your schoolmates.”

**Liam’s pastimes.** Liam’s entertainments provided an educational payoff. Warhammer involved gluing together models of futuristic creatures and machines for battle on huge boards at the Games Workshop store or at home. The contests demanded strategic thinking with complex manoeuvres similar to chess. The game led Liam into avid reading of the Warhammer novels, which connected him to other authors of science fiction and fantasy. Video games also provided stimulating gameplay with incidental learning: of particular interest to Liam was military history. Liam and his friends have battled in military campaigns from every epoch: from Caesar’s Gallic campaigns to the Normandy landing.

**Grade 8.** Grade 8 was quite a debacle, rife with lessons for school negotiators. Liam and his classmates looked forward to another year with Ms. D. Unfortunately, a parent had made a complaint. Ms. D. held qualifications for the primary and junior grades but not Grades 7 and 8. Ms. Sanders of Grade 2 had the qualifications and so the principal asked them to switch grades. In Grade 2 Ms. Sanders had shown little kindness, effort, or skill, and the parents had had enough of her. One parent took the initiative. She rallied the parents to boycott the class and most students stopped attending. She organized a letter-writing, telephone-calling protest directed at the superintendent, trustee, and director of education. The campaign ended with the Grade 2 teacher transferring to another school and a new teacher taking her place.

Mrs. Welsh, a recent graduate from the faculty of education, stepped in. She had experience occasional teaching, but Liam’s class was her first long-term occasional contract. She showed intelligence, planned her lessons well, and demonstrated skill at classroom
management. Liam presented a paper that he had written on the damage talcum powder can do to the reproduction of marine life. She applauded this work. We parents would have been happy to have Mrs. Welsh take the class to graduation. Unfortunately she was expecting and left at Christmas.

We had hoped that the principal would find another teacher like Mrs. Welsh, young, intelligent, and striving to prove herself. Instead Karen gave the position to another substitute teacher, Mrs. Alonzo. She was a parent of a child in the school and worked as a substitute teacher only at St. Demetrius. She was cheerful with a good sense of humour, and when not teaching often volunteered in the school. The staff welcomed her as one of its own. However, when she took over this six-month assignment she was not prepared to do the work. Her knowledge of the curriculum was rusty and she had trouble managing the boys. Liam thought of that year as a waste of time in terms of learning, but had a great time with his group of friends.

One event made Grade 7/8 exciting. The French teacher organized an exchange program with a school near Quebec City. The Ontario students stayed at houses in Quebec for five days, and then two weeks later the Quebec students came to Toronto for five days. Liam’s French never improved, but one of the Quebec girls sent him a message via a go-between. She said that she liked him. He phoned me from Quebec in a panic to ask, “What do I do?” I advised him to talk to her.

After Liam graduated from St. Demetrius he never went back to visit teachers as secondary school students sometimes do. In describing St. Demetrius, an instructor at OISE who knew the school from placing preservice student teachers there said to me, “It seems as if St. Demetrius may have locked itself inside its walls, guarding the past against an unknown future, demanding behaviour patterns that may deny its students entry into the new world.”

**Ignatius Loyola.** As Grade 8 wound down in the spring of 2009, the parents and their children went to the various open houses at the neighbourhood’s secondary schools. They had four main choices: the Catholic co-educational Cardinal Lesage, the single-gender Catholic schools Ignatius Loyola for boys and Our Lady of Fatima for girls, and Mountbatten. Most rejected Mountbatten, the TDSB co-education school, for its reputation as a party school.

We considered Cardinal Lesage seriously, mostly because I favoured co-education, but at the open houses Cardinal Lesage seemed disorganized and careless, whereas Ignatius Loyola appeared serious, inviting, and professional. For us, Cardinal Lesage was a 40-minute bus ride or a 20-minute car ride. Almost every St. Demetrius boy chose Loyola, except his friend Jamie.
(the son of my participant, Alexandra), who went to Cardinal Lesage because it was nearer his house.

**Grade 9 bullying and ostracizing.** In Grade 9, Liam’s friend Ned decided to bully him. Ned was a burly teenager interested in snowmobiles, mountain bikes, and go-karts, disaffected with school. Liam looked up to him, prizing his friendship. Unfortunately, Ned had suffered through his parents’ difficult divorce. From Grades 6 through 10 he became a highly-effective bully. When walking to school with friends, he would routinely ask “Who will we pound today?” If someone voiced concern, Ned would say, “Then we’ll pick on you.”

In the first week of Grade 9, Ned decided to target Liam. Normally a “pounding” lasted three to five days but Liam’s lasted throughout Grade 9. Targeting Liam seemed senseless: they had spent that previous summer together, enjoying our cottage, playing on Ned’s pocket bike, helping Ned’s mother move to her own place. One day Liam came home from Ned’s apartment crying after Ned’s mother had cursed him out in front of Liam. Maybe witnessing Ned’s humiliation had settled Liam’s fate. Former Grade 8 classmates shunned, insulted, and mocked him. Ned checked him in the hallways.

I was apoplectic. By this point, Ned had moved in with his father and brother. I knew Ned’s father; we had skied together on school ski trips. At first he was helpful, saying that he and his boys were taking family therapy. Later, he shut me down, claiming all kids played these games. I sought counsel from the school’s vice-principal without identifying Ned. Liam had forbidden any of my interventions, hoping that his turn would end soon so that he and Ned could become friends again. The vice-principal let me know that he had the tools to end the bullying. These included meeting with Ned and his father, suspension from the school, and even expulsion. That felt empowering, however I let Liam, with his desire for reconciliation, thwart my taking action. Not advocating was a mistake. I could have stopped a year of suffering in its tracks.

Without intervening, all I could do for him was tell him the story of my former student. She was a bright Grade 8 Chinese student: When she was bullied she simply ignored the meanness. She concentrated on her studies, her family, and her friends outside school, and, over time, the abuse faded away.

Liam took my advice to heart, concentrated on his friendship with Jamie, joined flag football and rugby, reached out to students from outside his elementary school circle, participated actively in class, and won the respect of his teachers. When I picked him up after
school, it still broke my heart to see him waiting alone, ignored by his St. Demetrius schoolmates, but he survived and became stronger for it.

In Grade 9, Liam upped his academic game. Probably because all of his teachers were specialists in their subjects, some with PhDs, he valued their courses. The teachers in turn recognized that they had in Liam a serious, bright, engaged student. His religious education teacher, when I met him in the hall, congratulated me for having such a fine son. All this academic focus led to an average of 85% and placement on the honour roll. In the fall of Grade 10, attending the honour roll ceremony, Liam was very pleased with himself. He identified himself as an honour roll student from then on and wanted to maintain that status. Liam would sometimes chastise Jamie for letting his marks slide.

**Athletics and fitness.** We never pushed Liam to take up competitive sports. He loved the informal games of the elementary school playground. In Grade 3, he joined the fencing club at Ryerson University. Starting in Grade 5, he played house league lacrosse. When I would drop him off early for flag football, I noticed that the older boys had befriended him and showed that they liked him. In the high school years that followed, rugby became his passion, with sevens in the fall and the full complement in the spring. In Grade 11 he added competitive lacrosse. He took three physical education courses and became quite fit. In 2012 he purchased the P90X fitness program and followed it or went to the gym.

**Reintegrating with St. Demetrius friends.** Early in Grade 10, Ned apologized. At Christmas break, he took Liam snowmobiling at his uncle’s cottage. Afterwards, Liam re-entered the society of his old St. Demetrius friends, but ironically Ned dropped out of the group. One boy, Mike, had the best teen dens in the neighbourhood, in huge houses, one at his mother’s and one at his father’s, and he now invited Liam. Many boys and girls came there but Liam quickly grew to be Mike’s closest friend. Soon he was stopping at Mike’s after school daily and sleeping over on weekends.

As Liam became friends with more and more teenagers at Mike’s, they invited him to other house parties. Alcohol became a worry, but he claimed to be sensible with it. Girls became very important, but he shared little of that with us.

**Liam’s health problems continue.** Liam’s health issues culminated in May of his Grade 10 year. After another lengthy sinus infection, our doctor ordered blood tests and found that his white blood cell count had fallen to leukemia levels. He referred Liam to the hematology department at Sick Children’s Hospital where they diagnosed him with neutropenia, which explained why he could not fight off bacterial infections. Loyola’s staff was very kind during
this difficult time. When I went to the guidance office to get his attendance records for the doctors, the guidance councillor came up to me and said, “If there is anything we can do to help, just let us know.” The secretary said, “He’s a good kid, you know that.” I nearly burst into tears. The last semester of Grade 10, he missed 40 days of school. The vice principal convinced his four teachers to waive final exams and use his term marks for his final evaluation, which left him on the honour roll with an 85% average.

**Grade 11 tutoring.** When Liam fell behind in mathematics after missing 40 days of school in the first semester of Grade 11, we hired a tutor to prepare him for the final examination. The tutor spent many hours working with him. Liam liked his tutor, but when his report came in, his final grade remained the same as his midterm mark. His friend Mike had the same experience with the same tutor.

**Grade 12 intervention.** In the first semester of Grade 12, Liam’s attendance problems came to a head. His social science teacher emailed me that Liam had missed two make-up appointments for mid-terms which would lead to zeroes on those tests if policies were strictly enforced. He pointed out that “learning cannot be done entirely on one’s own as the classroom experience is integral to this process.” He suggested that Liam might apply for home instruction, or take distance learning. At the mention of distance learning, I thought of Sally, a former Grade 7 student that I had kept in touch with as she grew up.

Sally took correspondence courses to complete her secondary school education. Sally’s mother, a single parent, suffered from depression, alcoholism, and poverty. After Grade 10, worries about her mother made secondary school impossible for Sally. She decided to stay home, and complete her secondary school through distance learning (correspondence courses in that time, the late 1980s). She successfully completed her Grade 13 credits with an A average. Correspondence allowed Sally to cope. While she was distressed about her mother, she could not participate in “the high school game,” as she put it. The social life of secondary school, the popularity contests, and dealing with other immature adolescents stressed her to the breaking point. Although I appreciated Sally’s concern for her mother, I thought at the time that distance learning did her a disservice. She became the parent of her mother, with no teenage life of her own. I concluded that Sally’s story was not a good parable for Liam, who thrived on the social life of school, and so we had to make other arrangements.

Fortunately, I received an email from the principal inviting me to a meeting with him and his three teachers, to discuss what he called “criteria for success in school.” Each teacher expressed his concern about Liam’s absences. I admitted that, when in doubt about how sick he
was, I would keep him home. His first period teacher suggested that, when feeling unwell, Liam could come into school anyway, and if he later felt worse, that teacher would send him home. That worked; Liam usually stayed at school. I was impressed at how the teachers and principal showed so much concern, gave us so much time, and resolved this matter so decisively.

**Aiming for scholarship marks.** Liam had figured out from watching his friend Carl work part-time at a grocery store that he could better use his time focusing on school work and match the money Carl made by winning scholarships.

Scholarship marks for the University of Toronto began with the President’s Entrance Scholarship with an average of 92%. That meant increasing his average by 7%. We strategized that, if hit with a long-term sickness, any mathematics, science, or physical education courses would drag down his average because excelling at those subjects needed classroom instruction. Therefore, for his final year, he chose only courses in the humanities.

**Academic challenges.** Despite his intelligence, Liam had many challenges. He postponed preparing for tests or writing papers until the night before. He seemed to love the risk and drama of working all night, despite the disadvantages of fatigue. Distractions were a problem. He could never resist responding to the latest text.

When writing a paper, Liam read extensively, often too much, not getting down to the writing. Perfectionism hindered him. He agonized over each word and phrase. He expected to achieve a final copy on the first draft. This goal caused great anxiety, which often lasted until 1 a.m., when the actual writing would begin. Even then, the writing was slow.

On occasion, his projects would become family affairs. One geography assignment required him to locate some 30 print articles on current political geography, summarize them, comment on them, and glue them in a scrapbook. That project took the family some 10 hours and we finished at 5 a.m. (The teacher docked marks because the glue had not dried.)

**University.** In January 2013, Liam applied to seven universities, with Western followed by the University of Toronto his first choices. I felt apprehensive about Western as it was far from home (a concern, considering health issues), and for its reputation as a party school. Mercifully, Liam set his sights on Victoria College at the U of T, where Mike planned to attend. An instructor friend who taught there recommended it highly. We researched it further. We appreciated it for its keen students, small class sizes, and the prestigious Vic One program. At the time of this writing, Liam was completing his second year there.
Reflections

**My schooling in retrospect.** Elementary school for me resembled a prison with time out in the yard, weekend passes, and summer probation. Secondary schooling provided a rich communal life that buoyed me through troubling family strife. University offered a program of carefully chosen subjects that helped give life meaning.

When I think more carefully, I see I could be more positive about my elementary schooling. Other contradictory memories arise. Alongside the nasty memories of corporal punishment and boredom, I recall the joy of writing comical stories to read to the class for the thrill of performance. I remember also writing an independent Grade 6 project on World War I. This tale of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand which led to the Great War fascinated me and when my writing was over I knew my topic well. The teacher deserved credit for risking an independent study in the age of textbook learning.

**Negotiating school within the home.** When I was in Grade 2, my Irish Catholic mother became irate when the public school took students of all denominations to the United Church Remembrance Day services. She only spoke out at the family table, making no complaint to the school, a silence typical of the fifties (Lindner, 1956; Whyte, 1956; Goodman, 1960). That discussion, however, affected my school negotiating later in life by revealing school’s fallibility.

**Interference.** Lakeshore Alternative School had a problem with parents. Some took the notions of parental involvement, collaboration, and the community school to the limit. They interrupted classes, argued with teachers, sometimes even yelling in front of the students.

To correct that, the principal, along with the school advisory council, in the final meeting in June of 2001, introduced a policy to interdict “interference,” but the term was poorly defined. The following September, when I suggested to the Grade 1 teacher that we group the Grade 1s and 2s separately when teaching mathematics, she complained to the principal, who deemed my action interference and asked me to stay out of the classroom.

The blunt instrument of ruling out interference stifled discourse between teacher and parent. LAS had suddenly switched from a free speech, collaborative, somewhat chaotic school to one that silenced any dissent. LAS needed a balance between chaos and suppression.

**Henry’s unschooling lessons.** Many unschoolers dream of leaving the city and going to the country. For Henry, fulfilling that dream led to calamity for his family: isolation, little cultural stimulation, loss of homeschooling networks, a three hour daily commute, less time for unschooling, marital breakdown, separation from his family, and realization that he (not his
spouse) had been the real engine of the unschooling project. Without him, not much schooling of any kind got done.

**Social life in classrooms.** As we transitioned from homeschooling in Grade 1 back to traditional school for Grade 2, I concluded that schools are primarily places where children meet each other. Much of the pain of homeschooling involves seeing your child feeling lonely. While one can mitigate the problem by exploring the local playgrounds and networking with other homeschooling families, we found that these small peer groups could not compete with the social benefits of a larger school environment. There the children can talk, play, and make lasting friends, independent of their parents.

**Knowing the school staff.** Veronica and I had a unique advantage as school negotiators. We were both teachers in the same school board where most of Liam’s stories took place. When we were consultants travelling the Board, we met many of its staff. We could build rapport through common stories with teachers and principals. Negotiating with Klara resembled asking an old friend for a favour. We had a significant advantage. Parents who are not teachers who wish to negotiate school need to develop a similar rapport with teachers and principals to get what they want.

**Which parent makes the best negotiator.** One parent may make a better school negotiators than her spouse. With Liam’s junior kindergarten teacher, I believe that I could have persuaded him to take me in as a volunteer when Veronica could not. For example, when he and I chatted, he mentioned that he wanted to transfer to a North York school, and I offered to help using my North York connections. With the issue of having special education support in Grade 2, Veronica knew exactly what to say to convince the teacher and principal that it was better for Liam’s self esteem if the family upgraded his reading and writing without any special education help. Different parents have different strengths in school negotiation.

**Picking your battles.** Liam was shocked when his Grade 2 teacher shouted at the children. We talked it over with him, but when asked if he wanted us to complain he said no, and we held our fire. One has to pick one’s battles; one cannot be at war all the time, although some of the other parents were. They kept Ms. Sanders in check so that we did not have to. Knowing what the other parents are up to helps a school negotiator decide when to act.

**Cursive writing.** In 2013, the Ontario common curriculum mentioned cursive writing for Grade 3, but nothing about formal instruction. During Liam’s schooling, Grade 1 and 2 teachers taught manuscript handwriting, but Grade 3 and 4 teachers never formally taught cursive. In the United States, in 2011, 48 of 50 states were phasing it out (Baziuk, 2011),
arguing that keyboarding and computer skills were a better use of instructional time. When I was a substitute teacher, I read secondary school students’ notes and saw many idiosyncratic versions of manuscript handwriting. Manuscript is slow to write and the multiplicity of versions hard to read. Children not taught cursive have trouble reading it (Petersen, personal conversation, January 2013). Liam felt grateful to Ms. Brown for teaching him legible cursive writing.

Cooperative learning, teamwork, or small group work. For good reasons, curriculum guidelines encourage teachers to provide projects that put students into teams to work collaboratively. The cooperative learning literature suggests many benefits in the areas of presentation, communication, problem solving, and interpersonal skills (Kagan, 1999).

I found that Liam had positive and negative experiences with cooperative learning. First let me describe informal co-operative learning. With his friends he would discuss topics of personal interest, such as World War II. The boys delved deeply into their chosen subject matter, thought critically and challenged each other, and arrived at better learning outcomes than any of them would have on their own. Formally, however, Liam found small group work problematic. At St. Demetrius and Loyola, each group member was given the same mark, with the least effective contributor getting a higher mark than deserved, and the most significant contributor getting a lower one than deserved. He found that the disengaged student could be a hindrance, disrupting the group’s work, and contaminating the output. To solve these problems, Liam would take matters into his own hands. During a Grade 7 project, his two partners just wanted to fool around. He made a complaint, which I passed on, and the teacher intervened, which led to a happy outcome. In secondary school he worked hard to team up with serious students, took a leadership role, and provided the team organization.

Although cooperative learning serves important ideals, this study found the implementation flawed. Liam’s teachers imposed the method without understanding its various strategies. First of all, they overlooked controlling group selection, often leaving the students to choose their own, which led to some groups having a number of disengaged students. Secondly, the teachers overlooked the importance of teaching the students the skills of collaboration, such as active listening and role assignment. Thirdly, they lacked evaluation techniques for separating out the performance of each individual, defaulting to assigning everyone a group mark. “Group marks should not be used: they penalize the good and reward the lazy” (GLACIE, 2014).

Volunteers in classrooms. In my practice as a teacher, teacher-librarian, consultant, and principal, I sought out parent volunteers and co-op students. I wanted help with the work, but
also I wanted other adults there for the students to relate to besides just me. I only had two incidences of friction, one with a parent volunteer and one with a co-op student. The rest went very well. I noticed that most of my colleagues were wary of these other adults in their space. I assumed that they were afraid of criticism or conflict. Teachers make mistakes, which they want to protect with cover stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Volunteers can have a vantage, revealing the hidden. I found that if I befriended my volunteer, and was open and transparent about my struggles and imperfections, then they reciprocated by refraining from gossip. But most of my colleagues never discovered this secret. Most teachers I met in my 45-year career rarely called in volunteers except for field trips and special classroom events.

Parent teacher confrontation. Meeting Mr. Gibson in his classroom to challenge him on his behaviour chart and confronting him in the hallway for holding my child in at recess may be seen as aggressive. When I described this incident to another doctoral student, a vice-principal, she called it bullying. After all, Mr. Gibson gave up his own breaks at recess in order to help students keep up with their work. In my career as a teacher, consultant, and principal, no parent ever confronted me like that. We school negotiators need to balance direct communication with forbearance.

When a parent calls a teacher out as I did, likely that teacher will discuss the event in the staff room. Those other teachers may create an image of that parent, a label, which will become current in the group mind of the staff. School negotiating parents need to play the confrontation card judiciously.

Recesses. Liam loved recess, his raison d’être for school. Recesses provided a break from the sedentary life of classrooms. To paraphrase A. S. Neill, at least the army lets one march around, whereas the classroom forces a child to sit still when every nerve in his body wants him to move (1960). Recesses allow unstructured free choice play, a wider freedom than classroom life. The children choose their own companions and activities. Recesses encourage exercise, badly needed when childhood obesity is on the rise.

Keeping a child in for recess to complete work may seem an act of concern for the student’s school success, but is also a gesture of discipline, control, and punishment (Foucault, 1977). The child who fails to keep up with the work suffers the punishment of this loss of privilege. The teacher makes an example of him, and other students will work harder to avoid his plight. A more enlightened approach, one congruent with Ministry policy, would be to make accommodations for the child who cannot keep up the pace. But teachers often fear that such concessions may lower the moral purpose and productivity of the full group.
**Competing values.** Parents and teachers often have competing educational values. For example Mr. Gibson privileged completing school work, whereas I ranked recess play more highly. I valued guest speakers from the real world highly. Ms. Denova did not. School negotiators need to be conscious of these background philosophical positions. At one of our St. Demetrius school council meetings, a discussion between the teacher/principal group and several parents became heated. A young mother said, “I hate it when we argue, we should just get along.” I held my tongue but thought, “We should expect some creative tension; teachers and parents have competing values.” Generally, teachers focus first on the dynamics of the full class, whereas parents worry more about their individual child’s needs. With active listening, both parties can check each other to reach a proper balance.

**Refraining from advocacy.** Liam’s Grade 6 teacher, Ms. Brown, encouraged student independence and discouraged parental involvement. When Liam asked me to refrain from making requests of the teacher, I complied. Of course, a child of 11 should not control a parent’s duty to stand up for his child, but we tended to follow his lead. Afterwards, I regretted putting up with the teacher’s making him finish all work missed after being home sick. Three years later, in Liam’s Grade 9 year, I hated myself for complying with Liam’s request that we wait out, rather than shut down, Ned’s bullying.

**Identifying oneself as an A student.** Liam had some trouble from Grades 2 to 5. He resisted the grind of school work and needed support. But in Grade 6 he appreciated his demanding teacher and he committed to the game of schooling. Liam and I accepted that much schooling involves busy work, much like the work of adults who get paid for it. That prompted me to pay him for high marks. And so he decided to shoot for As. I said to him, “School is less painful when you are receiving As; students who score Ds suffer more.” He then appreciated his role as a high-scoring student.

Mario, a participant in this study, observed that students tend to signal to the teacher which letter grade they are accustomed to and tend to repeatedly achieve that mark. C students continue to get Cs while A students achieve As. What Mario described, the literature refers to as self-efficacy theory, or “the student’s judgement about his/her capability to perform a task at a specified level of performance” (Seifert, 2004, p. 137). Because of this social psychology, this tacit agreement between teachers and students, whenever I had talks with Liam’s teachers (particularly concerning his long absences) I always encouraged them to regard Liam as an A student.
Cranks. One dictionary definition of a crank is: “an unbalanced person who is overzealous in the advocacy of a private cause” (Dictionary.com, 2014).

Adriana was a prominent parent at St. Demetrius who served on the school council. Most parents and teachers considered her a crank. She often raised issues that interested no one but her. Sometimes Adriana would hit on an issue that was controversial but needed the principal’s attention. Once she locked onto such an issue she was relentless. At these times, she did a service for the community of parents and especially those who avoided conflict.

At other times, she was mischievous. It was Adriana who, for no discernible reason, complained that Ms. Demarco, the Grade 7/8 teacher, lacked intermediate qualifications. That complaint created the Grade 8 debacle described in my story. School negotiators, who volunteer, communicate, and advocate, need to deal with cranks while avoiding the tendency to become cranks themselves.

Government policy and school negotiators. We entered LAS in 2000, in the middle of the Common Sense Revolution, the policy of the Progressive Conservative Party under the leadership of Mike Harris (1997 to 2002). The government, after centralizing education, attempted to cut costs, to “rationalize” the system. The goal was to provide no more than 100 square feet of institutional space per child (CBC, 1998). That led to the closing of 192 schools throughout the province (Britto, 2012).

A storm of criticism arose. Even Charles Pascal, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education and Training at the time, said that the changes would “take money out of the system and remove democratic structures, all of this too quickly for the system to adapt” (Pascal, 2001). TDSB trustee Sheila Ward stated that “the Harris years unleashed havoc on schools across the province” (Ward, 2011).

Nevertheless, these changes benefited our family as we achieved immediate entrance to LAS. Normally, parents would place their name on a waiting list when the child was two, hoping for a spot at the local alternative school when she turned four. With the need to meet the government’s enrolment quotas, the school took in everyone on its waiting list that September of 2000. A policy that some parents found disastrous we found fortuitous. Successfully negotiating school requires skill, but also luck.

Boys in school. St. Demetrius’ school council and its teachers discounted the need for boys to have intermittent bursts of high physical energy during recesses, lunch, and gym class. The primary school yard had little space for Grade 2 and 3 boys to play their soccer. To me, these escapes acted as pressure release valves so that they could sit still for the next classroom
session. St. Demetrius also, like most schools in that period citing safety concerns, banned any physical contact in boys’ play. Even a low contact sport such as soccer, played with a tennis ball, the anxious staff considered full of danger.

The typical St. Demetrius class emphasized lecture, full class instruction, and paper and pen activities, unlike the progressive schools with their activity methods, group work, and getting up and making things with concrete materials. These programs that included activity better matched a boy’s need to move about.

The literature describes many differences between male and female learners. Pellegrini and Smith note about rough-and-tumble play, “Males exceed females in frequency of [rough and tumble play] in virtually all cultures that have been examined and also among many other mammalian species” (2000, p. 389). Michael Reist (2012) goes so far as to claim that “Because they are highly kinesthetic, and therefore bored by all the sitting and reading and writing . . . we have a huge population of disenfranchised, alienated, angry males in our schools for whom the system simply does not work.”

Despite many years of the Ministry attempting to recruit more male teachers into elementary schools, St. Demetrius had only one. I have found that most female teachers find it hard to fully empathize with boys’ energy levels.

Reviewing Liam’s experience at St. Demetrius reinforced our decision to send him to the single-gender school, Ignatius Loyola. Not only did the staff know how to manage boys’ energy levels, but the teachers seemed to celebrate it.

**Homework.** In Grade 2, Liam went from unschooling to *uber* schooling. Poor Liam had entered school after the conservative restoration that began in Ontario with the 1994 Royal Commission on Learning, which stressed centralized curriculum, standardization, accountability, and testing. Teachers felt the pressure to show more learning output, which took more time, and meant sending more work home. To me, many of these homework exercises seemed to be nothing other than piling on work to see if the child could take it. Added to this change in the educational zeitgeist, St. Demetrius itself was a demanding place. Many of the parents pressured the school to match the diligence and production of other high achieving academic schools.

The work of Grades 2 through 5 seemed to Liam burdensome, unpleasant, and tedious. Through Grade 6 and 7 he became more engaged with the schooling. Grade 8, however, was a respite, not for any pedagogical reasons, but because the teacher lacked the energy to generate and evaluate a sufficient amount of work to justify sending some of it home.
Secondary school was less stressful than elementary school, despite the dire warnings of Grade 8 teachers. The secondary school teachers tended to assign homework but not check or mark it every day. The students quickly concluded that, if they understood a concept, particularly in mathematics, they need not complete all of the exercises. Whether by design or circumstance, the teacher’s approach conformed to the principles of outcomes-based education (Spady, 1993). If one has mastered a concept, one can move on to the next one, without repeating all of the dull exercises of the first.

**Switching sides.** I began my career in negotiating school by taking a critical position in regard to school as institution. My favourite authors were A. S. Neill, John Holt, and John Taylor Gatto. My preferred negotiating school strategies were homeschooling, alternative schooling, and advocating for the child.

As homeschooling failed us in the social realm and alternative school failed in the pedagogical, Liam needed to go to the regular neighbourhood school. Since going to school as an A student is more enjoyable than attending as a D student, my major negotiating school strategies became communicating with teachers and helping Liam succeed. Like the hippies who stopped marching on Washington and joined the corporate world, I switched sides from the radical to the conservative. I now saw the good in helping Liam align his wishes with the requirements of bureaucratic society, as David Olson described it (Olson, 2003).

**Parents highly involved in the schoolwork.** I worry that I did too much of helping Liam with his assignments. My efforts might have been counterproductive; perhaps I should have let him have his failures early in secondary school. During his first year at university he had terrible trouble writing papers. In the final month, he fell behind on five of them and Veronica needed to help him finish them.

**Teenage minds.** I had difficulty in improving Liam’s academic performance during a time when he was flexing his teenage independence. Fortunately, we have much literature on the subject. One quote from Wolf stands out as particularly relevant: “[Teenagers] become victims of the classic adolescent paradox. While they demand freedom, and fight to attain it, they still need to feel their parents’ strength. Teenagers battle to dismantle their parents’ authority, but they can find themselves adrift if too successful” (2002, p. 5).

I felt that while Liam was right to want to exercise his freedom, he may not have appreciated the freedom that he already had. Many teenagers rightly feel that they have to fight to be recognized as responsible, self-directed members of the adult world. Liam, however, had
always been treated as such, and therefore did not have quite as much reason to rebel. Wolf shows awareness of such parent-child situations, stating in his introduction:

Teenagers of today have grown up in an era of far more lenient parenting practices compared with any previous generation. Their world may be complicated and scary; nonetheless, they feel more empowered than teenagers did in the past. They are more assertive and less directly obedient, especially at home. This change in teenage behaviour is real. It requires a similar change in teenage parenting (2002, p. xvii).
Allan: The Man Who Understood and Loved School

Introduction

Allan loved school and excelled at it. He became a distinguished professor of education, a prolific author, and a popular presenter. However, when he tried to teach his son, Len, how to “be a school kid,” he could not. After Len grew up, Allan said, “I have given 60 years of my life to school and school has let me down.”

Connection

I met Allan in 1970 when I entered the College of Education, currently called the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, to begin my Bachelor of Education. Allan was an instructor of language arts. We became close friends, and shared many fine conversations about life, literature, and education. Our connection continued even while his career took him to the United States, Britain, and mainland Europe. But, whenever he returned to Toronto, I would always attend his speeches, meet with him, and we would advance our conversation and friendship.

Background

Family life. Allan was born in Ontario in 1939. His father, George, was 26 at the time, and came of age in the Depression. George was a storekeeper then but later took up the electrical trade. As a father, George was intimidating and brusque. Allan’s mother kept house, and died young when he was 20. His only sibling, Bill, was four years younger. Bill left home while in high school because his father was difficult after his mother died.

This family of four had an extended family with uncles, aunts, and cousins scattered across south-eastern Ontario. One of the aunts, a favourite of Allan’s, later served the role of grandmother to his son. The family moved every two years, and Allan can name 10 different towns where he lived. Allan’s parents were active in their communities. They joined the PTA in one town and helped build the Anglican Church in another. Allan described his family as struggling working class; they owned their own house and were members of the Book of the Month Club, but were never rich enough to vacation in Florida.

Schooling. From the first day of Grade 1, Allan was a “school kid.” He understood school and loved it. He would “never mouth off” and always wanted to do well. Allan could not imagine faking his homework or skipping school. Instead, he would ask his teachers for extra worksheets. “I even took a Valentine card to my supply teacher in Grade 8,” he told me. That is how Allan became “top kid,” and consistently placed first in his class. He understood school and how to succeed at it. “Would you throw your French fries on the floor?” he asked as we talked.
in a restaurant. “Of course not. That is because you understand restaurants the way I understand school.”

In the 1940s and 1950s, the curriculum was uniform. A student could end school on Friday in Cornwall and start again Monday on the same page in the mathematics text in Renfrew. Thus, school was a source of stability in a life of constantly moving house, and a hideout from a difficult father.

Seven years younger than Allan, I attended a Toronto Catholic elementary school where the teachers would strap generously. Allan claimed that his was another world where the strap was never used in the classroom. He did not grow up in a big city, and lived in places that he termed “monoculture,” by which he meant white, working class communities. In Allan’s words, “If any of the kids acted up in school, their fathers would beat them with a two-by-four when they came home.” Of course, the practice of strapping existed in Allan’s time. I wondered if a school kid like Allan would have felt anxious seeing other children strapped. “No,” Allan said. “It never happened in class.”

Allan noted that few students acted out in class; instead, they were “silenced.” They knew how school worked, and if they did not, they quit. Many students quit then, but there were places to go. Factories, farms, and trades were alternatives to school. Because so many students quit, Allan’s Grade 13 class held exceptional students. Everyone who was there wanted to be there. They were all “school kids,” like Allan.

“All these were very fine schools,” Allan said. “Very fine teachers. No teacher had to say ‘be quiet.’ Not ever.” Allan recalled the classes as being calm with teachers who “knew their stuff,” and knew how to communicate it. The trigonometry teacher once threw a piece of chalk and that “was the sum of it.” These were small towns without big city problems and immigration. Teachers mainly taught the children of poor British descendants whose parents backed up the school’s discipline. From this sort of school milieu, Allan won a scholarship to the one-year program at Teachers’ College. Thus, one year after leaving Grade 13 at age 18, he was busy teaching 10- and 11-year-olds in Grade 6.

**Adult life.** Soon after launching his teaching career, he completed his BA in the evenings and summers. He also took additional qualifications in language arts. All of this academic and professional work went on while Allan was teaching students in Grades 6, 7, and 8, but Allan was always a man who could get down to hard work, or, as he called it, “dig a ditch.”
While Allan had high expectations of his students, he ran a happy classroom. “I was an easy teacher,” Allan said. “We laughed all the time.” He expected the students to behave as he had when he was age 11, 12, or 13. At that time retention was a common practice in the school systems, so Allan found himself teaching 16- and 17-year-olds in Grade 8. Allan’s teaching style, humour, and sense of play eased the trouble of being so close in age to the students. He said that if a teacher does a good job teaching, the students will pay attention.

In the evenings when he was not marking, preparing lessons, or taking courses, Allan taught adult conversational French with excursions to restaurants and trips on trains and buses. Many of his students wanted to go to France and were serious about learning French. He ran it as he would later run additional qualification classes. Allan said, “Many teachers fail at teaching adults. They try to bully them the same way they do with children, but that does not work.” Teaching French was great practice for his next role as a curriculum consultant.

After five years of teaching for a school board, Allan became its first consultant in language arts, travelling from school to school advising teachers. Three years later, after publishing his first book, the prestigious Toronto District School Board hired him to be its language arts coordinator. That position quickly led him to a secondment to the College of Education, where he taught language arts from 1970 to 1972.

There, I took his class in language arts and attended the follow-up seminar at the Blue Cellar Pub with other serious students wanting to get to the heart of the educational matter in those revolutionary days of 1970 and 1971. We read and discussed Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s *Teacher* (1964), A. C. Hill’s *Teaching and the Unconscious Mind* (1971), and Fader’s *Hooked on Books* (1966). To this list of texts, over the next 35 years, Allan would add at least 50 of his own books ranging in subject from language arts, to poetry, to how schools are run.

Unfortunately for us, his serious students, Allan left Toronto in 1972 to take his master’s full-time in England where he resided until 1974. In 1974, he moved to Illinois to chair the Language Arts Department at the University of Chicago’s Faculty of Education. In 1976, he began his PhD studies, which he completed in 1982. The next year he took the position of chair of the Elementary School Program. In 1990, he turned his attention to teaching graduate school, supervising students, speaking at teachers’ conferences, and writing his books. By today he has supervised numerous master’s and doctoral candidates.
Negotiating School

Len. Allan married in 1976. In 1980 the couple had their first and only child, Len. Three years later the marriage fell apart and they divorced. His ex-wife moved away and showed no interest in shared custody or visiting rights. Allan became a single father.

Daycare. Len went to daycare in 1983 and 1984 at the same university where Allan taught. That independent, private daycare was one of a kind, and the staff there understood and loved Len. Allan described the facility as “the most wonderful daycare God ever saw.” The daycare is gone now, replaced by a stricter, more regimented institution.

Kindergarten. From the daycare, Len went to Drake Elementary School for kindergarten, located close to the university. Many professors sent their children there and Allan marvelled at the kindergarten staff of his son’s school. Len loved those teachers, and Allan deemed them brilliant.

The bleak years in public school, Grades 1 and 2. Once Len moved into Grade 1, however, it was obvious that “the Grade 1 teacher couldn’t deal with him; she couldn’t handle him.” At teacher interview time, the school principal told Allan not to be mean to Len’s teacher because she was their best teacher. “As if I would be mean,” Allan told me. “But she was not helping my child at all.”

I mentioned to Allan the determination of Grade 1 teachers I knew. They were tough because they were anxious to get their charges reading by June. Allan noted that Len knew how to read already; Allan had taught him at home. When I asked Allan whether Len was hyperactive or had attention deficit disorder (ADD), Allan shook his head. “He would be labelled that way today but he wasn’t. He just didn’t understand school and he couldn’t cope. My son couldn’t figure school out.” For five years, Len went to a child psychiatrist who compared Len to a blind man at a busy intersection who could not tell which way to go. Despite his expert knowledge, Allan could not help Len understand school.

Whatever Len was doing wrong in Grade 1 just got worse the next grade. The Grade 2 teacher could not manage him. The school sent him home and taught him through home instruction. Allan then decided to start anew moving Len to the neighbourhood school, McKinley Park, two doors from their house. But the principal refused to admit Len, saying, “Children from single-parent homes always turn out to be failures.” According to Allan, “It was definitely a story from Dickens, a tale of a youth who had absolutely no luck.”
However, Len did find some luck at the next nearest school, Burroughs. “A great principal, out of kindness, took Len in.” The principal had no obligation to take a student from outside his catchment. Len’s teacher was a kind man, and the rest of Grade 2 was happy.

That is not to say that Len’s Grade 2 year was not without problems, but they were handled with humanity and humour. Allan reported: “The principal would phone and say, ‘Come and get him; he’s at the store again.’ I would go over and he would say a friend gave him a candy so he went over to get him one in return.”

Clearly Len was having difficulty comprehending the restrictions of school. I compared Len’s situation to Liam’s story of entering a traditional Grade 2 class after three years of absence from traditional schooling and how the principal, Klara, empathized. She had emigrated from Germany at age seven speaking no English, and understood Liam’s culture shock.

By the next year, the kind principal at Burroughs transferred. The next principal lacked the understanding needed to protect Len. Then Len’s Grade 3 teacher differed greatly from his Grade 2 teacher. She lacked his empathy and accommodation. For example, she taught from books written for 14-year-olds. When Allan questioned that, the teacher made no attempt to change or even explain her methods. Len’s situation was now quite different from Liam’s: Liam’s principal was very helpful while Len’s was not.

So, in Grade 3, Allan’s “Dickens story” came to a head. Len now had an unhelpful principal, an ineffective teacher, and unfriendly vice-principal who insisted that Len be transferred to a school with a behaviour program. She even began the administrative work. During open house, Allan brought along a friend, a fellow professor of education. Commenting on the place, his friend said, “Allan, get your son out of this school before the sun comes up.”

The experience with Len’s school affected Allan professionally, as well. “I became more of a guerrilla. My speeches changed. Everybody who knows me knows that my speeches became about Len and the curse of school for those kids who can’t succeed.”

**Alternative community school.** Allan removed his son from Burroughs and sought out an alternative school. Allan and Len went out banging on the doors of various alternative community schools but were turned down by all of them. They eventually came to the doors of Roosevelt Co-operative School. Allan walked in and told the parent coordinator: “I have no idea where to put my son and I want your help.” She said to him, “Bring him in right now; we’ll take him.” And that is what he did.

Roosevelt was a school of some 25 students ranging from JK to Grade 6 situated in a church basement. The parent body consisted of artists and eccentrics, most of whom lived in the
Roosevelt Cooperative Housing Project. “I was not one of them,” Allan said. “I was the guy in the suit and tie, and I was the one who stood aside.” As with Liam’s alternative school, the parents just wanted to do their own thing and were not terribly impressed with expert opinion.

Two teachers taught in that church basement. One taught JK through to Grade 2 and the other taught Grades 3 to 6. Len’s teacher, Peter, had no Bachelor of Arts degree, and no teaching certificate. Rather, he was an artist, a designer, and a resident in the church basement. “Peter was like a child, full of amazing energy. He was a priest-teacher.” Allan said. At night, Peter would spend his time working out the lessons for the next days and weeks and building sets for the plays the students were always writing and producing. A typical day might begin with some group activities organized by the teacher, followed by a neighbourhood walk to find objects of interest like leaves, stones, and pop bottle caps to discuss, study, and write about.

The lessons in language arts, mathematics, and science were expected to fall out of the daily activities, in the manner of discovery learning and integrated curriculum. Since the class had four grade levels, the older students would help teach the younger. Large group projects like putting on a play galvanized the school. In summer, camping at the nearby Illinois state park or taking a trip out to the east coast where Peter’s family had a house by the sea combined school and family life. Of course, Allan did not find it easy. He recalled in horror one trip when the children went out in rowboats in choppy weather without a single lifejacket. Allan’s heart stopped but the other parents were not alarmed.

The community school was very close and friendly, but the teaching style was not one that Allan preferred. “I’m not alternative teaching, I’m direct teaching. That’s the teaching I love.” At his Grade 6 graduation Len stood up and thanked Peter publicly. It was very moving. The next year, Peter went back to his home town, and the school closed.

**Alternative public school.** Allan went searching for another school, this time a Grade 7 and 8 one. I asked Allan, given the transition to the intermediate grades, if he had considered a seriously academic school. He said, “No, I believed in the eternal worth of people. I knew it would all work out.” Thus Len continued his alternative schooling at Edgewater, a downtown public school on the south side. “A friend of mine got Len into Edgewater,” Allan said. “It actually had a waiting list. As the parent liaison, she put Len at the front of the line.”

Although the Chicago public school system of 1992 emphasized prescribed, centralized curriculum, public alternative school staff and students had latitude to adapt it to some degree. The curricular topics remained, but staff and students could pursue them their way. They favoured interest projects with individuals and teams of students taking their own slant on the
topic using concrete materials and active, collaborative learning. In this more stimulating way, they explored their subject matter: “It was all project-based,” Allan said. I asked if Edgewater was a positive experience, to which Allan remarked, “The best ever.” He did not know how the alternative schools managed to survive the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s, but he recommended them highly.

**Secondary school.** If Edgewater was child-centred and progressive, Len’s next school was not. Deerbourne High School was a traditional teacher-centred secondary school. Allan now wanted Len to experience a “good school” which was trouble for Len. To pass all of his courses, Len needed summer school every year. I asked if, in retrospect, Deerbourne’s high standards were too painful for Len. Allan said, “He loved Deerbourne; he loved basketball, track, and football. When the next sport came along, he was there.”

**Football school.** Football was Len’s passion. He wanted to become an NFL wide receiver. To support this passion, Allan sent him to football camp in the summers, and, for Grade 12, to a traditional private boarding school that focused on training football players. Sports made life in the school worthwhile for Len and led to his greatest academic successes. In short, this so-called extra-curricular activity became the incentive, reward, and motivation for attending school and doing well there.

The students boarded at the school, which was in Lake Forest, an hour’s drive from Allan’s home. Allan hated sending Len away to a boarding school but saw that, on the wings of his passion for football, Len could succeed at school. At Deerbourne, Len’s grades were in the 70s, but at this school, they soared into the 90s. In fact, the school nominated him for the Carnegie Medal of Academic Success, an award that honoured the one student in each school in the state who had the highest academic achievement. How did Len make this leap from the 70s to the 90s? “There were only 5 or 10 students in each class,” said Allan. “The drive to remain in the school was highly motivating.”

**University.** If Len’s marks skyrocketed at the private school, they collapsed at Bradley University. University was yet another dip in his academic roller-coaster ride. Over the one year at the university, Len achieved some credits, but not enough. “He could not work independently,” said Allan. It seemed that Len needed that teacher ratio of the hockey school in order to succeed.

**Technology college, marriage, and children.** Len quit Bradley and began work, first at a grocery store and next at a liquor store. He liked the jobs, and enjoyed working; it gave him a respite to prepare for his next adventure: love, and marriage. He met Mary, who lived in
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, over the Internet. After some months of a long-distance relationship, Len decided to move to Pennsylvania. There, he returned to college, this time taking courses in computer technology. Len successfully completed two diploma programs at a community college and announced to his father, “Now I understand school. Why did it take so long?” Negotiating school for Len meant suffering and confusion with crowded lecture halls, and success with mentorship and apprenticeship. Len then started a career as a technologist maintaining medical equipment in a distinguished hospital.

Peter, Len’s former teacher, later emailed Allan that he had set up a website for the Roosevelt Co-op School’s alumni. Allan replied that Len had graduated, married, and had two children. Peter wrote, “I have so many tears in my eyes, I can’t read. I am so happy.” Allan and I agreed that this interchange represented true education, which takes its source from the heart. The educator and the student have a relationship marked by the teacher’s care for the child over time.

**Reflections**

**Teacher professionalism.** Allan spoke of the fine teachers of the 1950s. Could we speculate that those teachers in the small towns were more effective than today’s more highly-educated teachers? Has something been lost in the last 50 years? For instance, the teachers’ colleges taught Allan classroom management. In my teacher training (1970–1971), we had none of it. A. C. Hill, in *Teaching and the Unconscious Mind* (1971), includes a chapter on the topic. “The young wolves try to take down the alpha wolf.” That unconscious reality persists today but classroom management courses do not appear to address it.

**Centralized curriculum, testing, and the swinging educational pendulum.** The centralized curriculum of the 1940s and 1950s allowed the boy Allan to move from town to town and arrive on the same page of the same mathematics book he left behind. That uniformity disappeared for a time from 1967 to 1996 but has returned to an extent with the common curriculum. The centralized tests of Grade 13 have become the Grade 3, 6, and 10 tests of today. It does not matter that the Grade 13 tests were no predictors of university success (H. Russell, personal communication, March 15, 1995). Centralized curriculum and testing returns no matter what research in education tells us.

**Fifties dropouts.** Leaving school early, at age 14 or 15, can be seen as a good thing: a kind of friendly, mutually agreed-upon divorce from schooling. Because the age of compulsory schooling was raised to 18, we know what the government hopes to achieve, a trained, literate workforce for the knowledge economy. Perhaps 12 years of compulsory schooling makes sense
for the academic stream. But the applied stream might acquire learning through less institutionalized, abstract learning situations. Apprenticeship and mentorship actively working in the real world achieving tangible results seems more fitting.

**Understanding school.** “I know school,” Allan told me. “But Len doesn’t.” As a boy, Allan was the master of understanding how school works. His parents never needed to help him. He just figured it out himself. To help his son better fit in at school, Allan taught Len to read before he went to school. Allan regularly discussed school with him and helped him with his homework. Allan suffered along with Len when he saw how school was failing his child. The worst was the Grade 1 and part of 2 at Drake and the Grade 3 at Burroughs. Three formative years were crippled by anguish. It coloured everything.

“He just does not understand school.” In our interview, these words became a mantra. In review, Allan has identified a new dysfunction, reminiscent of attention deficit disorder or dyslexia. One could call it “dyschola:” the condition of not being able to comprehend the structures of school. A learning disability identification works with the framework of the structures of school. Those with dyschola lie outside the framework, misunderstanding the whole thing.

**Grade 1.** Len floundered at Grade 1. The paradigmatic shift from kindergarten to Grade 1, from play to work, brought extreme tension for several of the children of my school negotiating colleagues. These Grade 1 tensions are more severe since the expectations of the common curriculum. Reading well by the end of Grade 1 is now expected, although educational research and the practices of many European nations refutes its value (Elkind, 1987).

**Who has the power?** Allan’s story teaches us how public schools can compete with the parents for jurisdiction of the child. “Who owns the child?” is a question running through the stories of the school negotiators in my study.

The power of the bullying school official has its limits. Allan could have gone over the head of the principal at McKinley Park who rejected Len for being the child of a single parent. He had no legitimate right to reject a student living within the school’s catchment. However, Allan feared putting Len in a place where he was not wanted. He feared a reprisal.

**Evaluating Roosevelt.** Roosevelt Co-op School contributed to Len’s growth (Dewey, 1938). The instruction was stimulating and experiential. However, more important than what the school did is what the school did not do. The school let Len learn in ways that were helpful to him, ways that did not force him into a regimented daily routine or a linear style of learning.
**Project methods.** At Len’s alternative Grade 7 and 8 school, teachers covered the state-mandated curricular topics using projects. Since I was in Grade 6, I have thought that project methods offer students a respite from direct instruction. They allow some free choice (within a curricular framework) both in the exact topic and the presentation, the product and the process. I associate this method with my supply teaching days from 1968 to 1970. I recall students in open area classes that surrounded a library given the freedom and time to pursue their own interests. I promoted interest projects throughout my 12-year career as a teacher librarian. The library was a rest from mandated topics where students could research and write about any topic in the world that piqued their interest.

**Covering curriculum.** “At Edgewater,” Allan remarked, “they never covered anything. I don’t think that ever entered their minds. I don’t think any good teacher lets the curriculum dominate.” Freedom to be creative with the subject matter existed throughout Ontario from the late 1960s to the mid 1990s. Since 1996 and the common curriculum, however, teachers seem curriculum driven. Liam’s teachers kept covering curriculum regardless of the ability of students to keep up or engage.

**Kind and mean school cultures.** The goodness or kindness of a school is random. One school is mean. One is kind. A school develops a different culture because of its history, the group mind of its teachers, and the leadership of the principal. The principals change every five or so years in most boards. The teachers’ group mind may outlast any principal as a particular dominant group will call in like-minded colleagues from other schools.

**Changing schools.** For Allan, adjusting school to fit Len meant moving him to a different school four times in elementary school and twice in secondary. That of course is an option for the middle- and upper-class. In fact, my family moved our house to be near an academically-successful school. Lower-income families find such moving difficult.

**Being a subversive.** Allan spoke of being a subversive. A school negotiator is often a subversive. According to Allan, one can only be a subversive if one lives in the midst of the situation. “The big shots said that I was the mainstay of the faculty of education not knowing that I have always been anti-school. I am a subversive, an underground agent, a resistance fighter. I have always been anti-school but I could only do it in the guise of someone who knows how school works.”

**Support systems.** Allan always had his friends: artists, teachers, professors. They were smart, insightful, and helpful. School negotiators need peer support. Running against
conventional wisdom leads to self-doubt and fear. Supporters offer perspective on the system. The group of friends act as a counter culture.

**Single parenting.** Single parenting affected Allan’s school negotiating. Being a single father seemed odd, even in the late 1980s, when Len was eight, in Grade 3. Allan had money and he travelled. He told me of the pure joy of spending a week with Len in Paris, visiting museums. Allan, of course, is a rare case. Statistics tell us that many single parents (mothers usually) live in poverty and may not be able to afford many negotiating school strategies.

**Magnet schools.** Technically, a magnet school is public, whereas Len’s football high school was private. But it shared the same dynamic as a magnet school. The focus that drew him was football, and so he joined a community of like-minded peers. His high level of motivation caused him to achieve higher marks in his academic subjects as well.

**Large public schools.** Large public schools have advantages over small alternative schools. They have the staff and equipment to support extracurricular activities, such as baseball, track, and football.
Mario: The Man Who Died and Was Reborn through Learning

Introduction

Mario immigrated to Canada from Italy at the age of 11. Even in his early years of learning in Italy, it was obvious that conventional schooling was not going to work for him. Later in life, Mario concluded that he had a learning disability that made reading very difficult (dyslexia) and attention deficit disorder. He failed three grades, stabbed someone when he was 19, and was sent to a hospital for the criminally insane. There he discovered his own method of learning, read essays and books, and acquired the drive to learn. Eventually he grew to love the art of learning so much that he became a teacher.

Connection

I first met Mario at a North York school in January of 1982. He had transferred into that school from a downtown Toronto school the year before. Along with Mya Smith and Joe D’Amarco, Mario and I were new to the school. The faculty there seldom left and were unwelcoming to new teachers. They were a traditional staff, whereas the four of us were more into active learning. We called ourselves the Black Russians and implemented a variety of new programs in the school. Mario and I continued our friendship ever after.

Background

Family life. Mario was born in 1946 in a small village in the centre of Italy, not far from Rome. He described his father as one of the petit bourgeoisie who had a government job as a parks ranger for a large national park. Mario’s mother’s family were shopkeepers. His mother stayed at home, although she did some dress-making in the house. He had one sibling, a sister, who was 13 years older. Mario’s father got involved in a scandal concerning the park and he, although innocent, was the “fall guy.” This event triggered the family’s immigration to Toronto. In 1957, Mario and his family settled down in the Bloor-Lansdowne area. His father became a caretaker in a factory.

Schooling. Mario soon discovered that he was not much good at school. He attended St. Theresa’s School, and was the only Italian there. He shared with me some accounts of his life at St. Theresa’s:

“I could not conform to what was required, the regime. I didn’t believe in it either. I did not believe that you had to do homework, study and apply yourself. I did not have the discipline, either external or internal, to do what was required of me, what was expected of me, what was actually dictated to me. They made me feel like a failure, they were unhelpful; they were not compassionate. No one would reach out and say: ‘You have a problem, let me help you.’ For
example, I did not get English spelling. I still don’t. I even have problems with Italian spelling and that is a phonetic language. I felt defeated about school. I felt hopeless, with no support. And yet I aspired for it in a kind of magical way of thinking. Grade 13 was almost impossible to pass, it was meant for the upper-middle class, not as a way of helping one get started but as a way of weeding one out. Only certain people could do those tests, certain families with certain support.”

Mario recalled a boy named Christopher from Argentina: “He was very smart but would not try, he was so beaten down, he had no positive reinforcement.” Mario described the system as “one size fits all.” If he had come 10 years later (1967) he would have received special education and/or a placement in an ESL class. However, at the time that Mario was in a Catholic school, special education did not exist, and learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder had not yet been defined.

So, Mario had a learning disability and an English language problem. He also had a “cultural problem:” he could not just quit school to become a construction worker like many of his countrymen. His family was from the Italian middle-class, which did not go into construction. At St. Theresa’s he was left alone at the back of the class for two months. St. Theresa’s was slightly beyond the Italian neighbourhood, and he was the only Italian there. The other students were of Ukrainian or Polish background and were born in Canada. If he had lived a few blocks south, he would have attended St. Bernard’s, an Italian school, and would have enjoyed a more sympathetic milieu.

Mario had no memory of how he learned to read English, but some recollection of “government books” and spellers. When he arrived here he was supposed to be placed in Grade 5 but the school put him in Grade 4. He felt guilty for being behind, and his parents and aunts reinforced this guilt. His aunt said, “Normally we learn English in six months.” He failed Grade 5 the following year. He remembered the teacher and her stories of Quebec but described her as “unfeeling.”

His Grade 6 teacher, Mr. Moroni, drove a Lamborghini. Mario had taken an interest in history and at one point corrected him on some detail of a lesson. The teacher acknowledged that Mario was right without getting defensive. In the back of the room there was a set of encyclopaedias, and Mario would take time to look at them whenever he could.

The Grade 7 teacher was wonderful. She had taught overseas, and he managed to learn from her some mathematics, which he had always found difficult. But his Grade 8 teacher was weak with no control. Mario and several other obstreperous boys were sent to another teacher,
who had what Mario called a degree in child sadism: “She was wicked, constantly humiliating
students,” Mario said. “She did not like me. She broke me, and when she was finished I felt as
worthless as a confederate dollar bill.”

In Grade 11 he failed mathematics with 47 per cent which meant that he had failed all of
Grade 11, not just that subject. After that he was three years behind his cohort, which made him
a 19-year-old in a class of 16-year-olds.

**Teenage and adult life.** At that time of his life he ran with a group of troubled teens. In
an incident at city hall involving a fight with a rival group, Mario stabbed another teen, but
eluded the police. The next day he went to school emotionally distraught, and told the story to a
sympathetic school nurse who had him admitted to the Toronto Psychiatric Hospital (TPH). He
was charged with “wounding” (assault with a weapon), but with the support of the nurse and the
hospital the court deemed him unfit to stand trial. At TPH he participated in group therapy, and
there realized that he had unique insight into people. A barrier broke. Insights flowed from him,
and he felt wise.

TPH was a short-term facility however, and the courts decided that he required long-
term treatment. The doctors transferred him to the Hospital for the Criminally Insane at
Penetanguishine. This drastic placement, however, turned out to be his death and resurrection.
He was assigned to a doctor who recognized his intelligence and had started a group therapy
program for patients who showed the most potential for success in treatment. Mario was invited.
Like the group therapy sessions at TPH, Mario felt enlightened and continued to enjoy the
recognition others gave him for his insights and intelligence. His confidence grew.

In that group Mario found a peer tutor. This patient, who was educated in England, had
committed murder. Although he had no affection for Mario, he answered his questions about
philosophy, literature, and psychology, and gave Mario directions on great books he should
study. Mario considered him brilliant.

Even at age 65, when I interviewed him, Mario considered himself dyslexic. Reading
was extremely painful and exhausting for him. Throughout his life he acquired most of his
information from books on audio tapes. Nevertheless, in this place, with his peer tutor teaching
him, Mario forced himself to read. “I put a marker 20 pages ahead, and would not stop until I
reached it,” Mario said. He had plenty of books, and time to read. He read Dostoyevsky’s *Notes
from the Underground*, Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Alan Watt’s writings on Zen
Buddhism, and so on. He did not merely read; he studied. The notes Mario took on *The Catcher
in the Rye*, he now describes as “etched in his brain.” The essays of Bertrand Russell were like
“food from the gods” to Mario: “He enlightened me; he became my hero. I found it easy to read Russell.” In fact, Mario claimed that he read himself to sanity, a process that he termed “bibliotherapy.”

Mario left the hospital with a self-taught, self-confident education; no longer was he bewildered or lost. He summarized his experience at Penetanguishene, saying it really saved him. “I never had that feeling before I went to that place.”

After 18 months of the psychiatric hospital he was demitted, went back to live with his parents, and found work in a factory. One day he came across a friend from the neighbourhood who told him about the newly established colleges of applied arts and technologies. By then he was 21 years old, a mature student who did not need to complete Grade 13 to enrol. He was rejected from a social work program, likely because of his psychiatric history, but he was admitted to the general arts and sciences program on the condition that he take upgrading courses in night school for mathematics and English. Every night he would make an arduous commute across the city to the college. “But it was so worthwhile, it was so stimulating,” he said of the experience.

The following September he was ready for classes when Centennial opened its doors for the first time. Most of the students were mature students, like Mario. The first day was chaos, but he met another friend from the neighbourhood who helped him get settled. He had an insatiable desire to learn, and never missed a class. He completed most of the readings, more than most students, and called his time at Centennial “learning without stress.” The instructors were very helpful and accommodating to ensure success. Many were Americans avoiding the draft. They had a sixties, revolutionary, and progressive approach to teaching. Those were the times, 1968, 1969, and 1970. Things were happening; the world seemed to be changing. We had the riots at Berkley, the Kent State shootings, and the peace march on Washington.

One instructor, Mr. Laporte, saw that Mario needed help with his writing and asked his girlfriend, who had an MA in English, to tutor Mario. She did so without charge every Wednesday night and Mario never missed an appointment; he was very committed.

During his second year he moved into residence at Rochdale College, an alternative university and residence. Rochdale was part of the counterculture. Courses responded to student interests, and were often taught by other students or for free by University of Toronto professors. These spontaneous short courses were called “teach-ins.” Students gathered around mutual interests. The eighth floor, where Mario stayed, was devoted to religious studies. These were serious people, like Pamela Burton, daughter of Pierre Burton, the Canadian writer. The
place included an American who was a veteran of the civil rights movement, who had converted to Catholicism. He introduced Mario to the Newman Centre, the Catholic chapel at the University of Toronto, with its avant-garde Masses, dance liturgy, and radical priests. And of course Rochdale was about LSD, sexual freedom, and dropping out of society. Many aspired to, as Mario put it, “move to Vancouver to do bead work and make leather belts.”

He thoroughly enjoyed his time at Centennial College, and graduated with 27 credits instead of the required 21. Mario was a member of the inaugural class, 375 started, but only 17 graduated. Mario was one of them. Upon graduating from Centennial, Mario took the grand tour of Europe, and spent four months travelling, from May 8 to September 19, 1970. He saw all the major museums and galleries in more than a dozen cities of Europe, and visited his relatives in the Italian countryside.

**Teaching.** Upon returning to Canada, he applied to Lakeshore Teachers’ College and was accepted. He started the following September, 1971, the last year one could attend without a university background. He had never intended to teach, but many of the Centennial instructors recommended Teachers’ College for him. In fact, one instructor, a rabbi, said that Mario would make a great teacher. Still, he resisted until after his European trip, when he realized that if he became a teacher he could return to Europe every summer. At Lakeshore, just as at Centennial, he was keen to learn, unlike many of his fellow students who took the whole training as a joke. At his first practice teaching placement he found he loved the children for their innocence, energy, and honesty. He could see that his place was in teaching.

In September of 1972 he was one of the first three students of his class hired by the Metropolitan Separate School Board, now the TCDSB. The Board was desperate for male elementary school teachers, and assigned him to a large open-area Grade 7 and 8 school, St. Martha. That first year of teaching was a disaster. He taught a Grade 8 class in an open area with three other classes. In this open-concept of teaching, the four teachers were expected to be a team, but he felt he had no support from his colleagues. In his words, he made “incredible mistakes—even hit a kid.” He could have been fired, but he had a kind principal who suggested that Mario transfer from Grade 8 homeroom to an ESL class. This move made him very happy, and he took this role very seriously. He took all of the ESL additional qualification courses, and learned all of the skills of a good ESL teacher.

In 1980 he left St. Martha for a school in North York, St. Benedict, where we met. This time he tried his hand at teaching Grade 4. He moved there because he now owned a condominium nearby, the legacy of a two-year marriage, which had ended because he could not
settle down. At St. John he taught in a portable and was a concern for his principal, Sister Bonita, because of his extravagant behaviour. He was very close to the children, and the portable served as his own school. I remember his work as a drama teacher, how he had the students mesmerized. He was spontaneous and imaginative. The Chicken Dance was popular at the time, and one recess he turned the speakers of his record player to face out the window to face the schoolyard. Soon all of the students were doing the Chicken Dance. I remember he was desperate for company after his divorce, very lonely, and that is how we became friends. He and I teamed up on several projects with our friends Mya and Joe, putting on theatre, and writing up a drama program that involved parent education.

In June of 1983 Mario sold his condominium, moved in with his sister’s family, and transferred to another open area school called St. Paul. He returned to ESL, but was tagged by his former principal, Sister Bonita, as someone who needed improvement. St. Paul had a strict principal, who had no reservations about telling off teachers who were too idiosyncratic. She checked much of his spontaneous behaviour. This was a cause of suffering for him, but he attempted to rein in his teaching style. From there he transferred to another grade school, where the principal knew and appreciated him. At that time he remarried and bought a house.

His final move was to a secondary school, St. Thomas. The school was located at the doors of a housing development, a rough neighbourhood that sent the school many students with academic problems. St. Thomas had the reputation of being one of the Board’s toughest schools. Nevertheless, Mario taught there from 1987 until retirement in 2001. The teacher who spoke at his retirement described him as a Falstaffian character, somewhat of a trickster who the staff counted on to break the boredom. With students, he could talk about real life, and mentor them on schooling and success.

He loved to travel, and made extra money for that purpose by teaching in the continuing education program, but suffered grief from one or two principals who found his teaching methods unacceptable.

Over the years Mario improved both his income and his teaching skills through further education. At the end of that first year, he noticed that his pay amounted to $5200 per year, while one of his colleagues’ totalled $8200. The difference had to do with academic qualifications; his friend had a university degree. Mario then decided to pursue continuing education at York University. Fortunately, York gave him eight credits for his work at Centennial. This meant he only had to take eight courses to get a BA, which he earned in geography, political science, and sociology. After four years, he was in pay category A3, second
from the top. To reach the A4 category, he acquired four specializations. In addition to ESL, he took special education, drama, and religious education. Eventually he was a category A4 teacher earning the most for his years of experience. He continued, however, to take night school courses in library, guidance, and psychology, just for the love of learning. In 1987, his second wife, Paulina, asked him to make his next course his last. And so he agreed, and took a footnote from his last essay, enlarged it, framed it, and hung it on the wall.

**Negotiating School**

**Michelangelo.** In 1988 Mario and Paulina had their first child, Michelangelo. Mario said that Paulina found caring for an infant stressful and distracting. Her interests were more directed toward her career and her PhD studies. Mario enjoyed every moment with Michelangelo and so took on more and more of the care of his son, feeding him late at night, and so on. Mario said that when Paulina agreed to be his wife, it was because she “recognized in me a good husband and father.”

**Daycare and Montessori school.** When they were at work, Lita, a family friend, took care of Michelangelo. Lita was also Italian and liked children very much. In Michelangelo’s third year he attended a Montessori school. At this age Mario noted that he was never aggressive, and would never complain about anything. Sometimes he would come home with a scratch or a bruise, but would make no mention of it. Also, he never really seemed to bond with the other children, not making any friends or attachments.

**Public School.** Mario, a Catholic teacher, put his child in the neighbourhood public school because it offered a seamless morning kindergarten and afternoon daycare. Interestingly, before 1996 when the province took over school funding, the Catholic School Board required its teachers to attend Catholic schools to assign their municipal property taxes to the Catholic Board. Mario needed written permission from his superintendent to enrol his child in the public school. Michelangelo enjoyed the school, and the dress-up room. Mario recalled his son enjoying putting on girl’s clothes, an interesting note because Michelangelo, in his twenties, announced that he was gay.

**Catholic school.** After kindergarten it was time for Michelangelo to go to a Catholic school. Mario, who attended Mass every Sunday, was a firm believer in Catholic education. Michelangelo ended up going to Our Lady of Grace, in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood quite far from home. Mario had a theory that attending a top-tier school would lead to social advancement, which he valued more highly than going to a neighbourhood school. This school was also convenient because it was on the way to the school where Paulina worked. Few
children were not of British descent, which was difficult for Michelangelo, who had a hyphenated Italian last name. He was lonely there, and Mario would often watch him playing by himself in the playground whenever Mario picked him up. Mario realized that his penchant for bargain hunting, as well as garage sale and thrift store shopping, would not help his son be accepted in this new environment, so he switched to buying him new and fashionable clothes. Another Italian boy moved to the school and became friends with Michelangelo. Eventually the other children accepted him and he became part of the social network.

**Choir school.** Mario had always hoped that Michelangelo would attend St. Andrew’s Choir School, which began at Grade 3, and could only be entered if the child passed an audition. Michelangelo was the only one from his school to pass. He was sad to leave, but the other children were proud of him.

At first Michelangelo had no problems with the choir school, but in late Grade 3 Nicholas, who carpooled with Michelangelo, started to pick on him. For some reason Nicholas had singled him out. By Grade 4, however, Michelangelo started to go on choir tours. He would share rooms with the unpopular students and gradually they became his own group of friends. He could not join one trip because there were too many other tenors. His group of friends came over to his house to console him. Mario noticed how affectionate they were, which made him wonder if Michelangelo and his circle of friends were gay.

Later, Nicholas became overtly gay and one of Michelangelo’s best friends. In the secondary school grades, he had a cohort of about five friends with the same sexual orientation. In his group, Michelangelo took on the role of the sensible one. Normally more secretive, on his graduation trip to Cuba he became more obvious about his sexuality.

Although he played the organ, piano, and violin, Michelangelo dropped music after graduation. He decided to become a teacher of mathematics, not music. Mario had wanted him to go to McGill, but his marks were not high enough. His average was 82 and McGill required an 87. Mario lobbied the teachers and the principal, but to no avail. Michelangelo did not mind going to York because two of his friends were there. Success with mathematics and chemistry in secondary school drove his subject choices at university. After graduating he took a year off to work at Starbucks. He loved it. The following year he took teacher training at OISE. At the time of this writing, he was teaching mathematics at a private school in the United Kingdom.

Mario noted that Michelangelo had a closer relationship with his mother and confided in her more than he did with Mario. He asked her for help and told her personal details. He was close with his father too, however, and continued to give him hugs and kisses.
Ella. In 1992 Mario and Paulina had their second child, Ella. As with Michelangelo, Paulina had a year off, but again Lita was the main daytime caregiver in the first three years, and Mario took over after work. Also, similar to Michelangelo, Ella went to Kent Public School, where her teacher recognized how bright she was in mathematics. For Grade 1, Ella went to Holy Name, the neighbourhood Catholic school. For the most part the school seemed fine, however some of the children made fun of her for dressing like a boy, and for loving sports. The school also scored low in the EQAO rankings of schools. Her best friend there was George, the son of one of Mario’s friends. Eventually he transferred to St. Luke. This school was 5 kilometres out of Ella’s catchment area, but she insisted on going. Like Michelangelo before her, she had to commute and carpool, and moved away from her neighbourhood friends. Again Mario was pleased because it brought her into contact with students of privileged families.

Gifted class. In Grade 5 she was placed in a gifted class. Ella loved her independent projects, and her gifted class teacher who was flamboyant and stimulating. Unfortunately, that teacher transferred schools and was replaced by a less talented teacher, who Ella did not respect. Also, the students of St. Simon, the school the gifted students were bussed to, picked on the gifted students. When Mario complained, the principal did nothing. Ella started to value gifted class less and less. When the gifted children returned to their home school class, new units had started in their absence; Ella had to make up the lost time. So, finally, Ella quit the program altogether.

Grade 6. Back at St. Luke, a gang of Grade 6 students, including the daughter of a teacher at the school, started tormenting Ella, with insults such as “Are you sure you belong in the girls’ washroom?” Mario brought this up with the principal, who offered to suspend the girls. Mario, however, considered that too drastic, so the principal instead had a serious talk with them. The problem went away and the girls became friends again. For the graduation ceremony, Ella produced an audio visual presentation, using her own pictures and music, which everyone there appreciated.

In elementary school, she sang with the Canadian Children’s Opera Choir, which gave her a chance to apply for the Catholic School Board’s School for the Arts. Her brother accompanied her on piano, but she had a false start, which ruined her audition. She felt that she had been treated unfairly, and Mario said that whenever that happened she stopped trying. She had two other chances to join the program, but by then she had turned against the school.

Ella next applied to a private Catholic secondary school nearby that used SAT scores to select students. She scored badly, however, and was rejected even though a similar test in Grade
had placed her in the gifted program. This was a shame, considering that school had a very good girls’ hockey program and hockey was her passion.

Her third choice, St. Stephen, was her neighbourhood Catholic school, but Paulina disliked the administration and Mario, after teaching there as a substitute teacher, found the students snobbish.

Public school. The nearest public school was Oakland Academy, which had a baccalaureate program. Unfortunately, the family had applied too late and all the places were taken. Ella therefore chose another public school in North Toronto. This had an advantage: many of her grade school friends had enrolled there. Mario had a strong allegiance to Catholic schools, but Ella was used to getting what she wanted and so she enrolled in the public school.

North Toronto Collegiate was an upper-middle-class school with well-behaved students. However, the family home was outside the school’s catchment. One might think that she had a right to attend North Toronto because the school offered a gifted program and she had been identified gifted in the TCDSB. Unfortunately, the TDSB did not recognize gifted designations given by other boards. So Mario began to work around the system. He asked a friend living in the school’s district to lie and let Mario claim that his family were his tenants, but he balked. After many appeals, Mario and Ella gave up on that school.

Fortunately, some other friends from St. Luke planned to attend York Mills Collegiate. This school was also out of catchment, but Mario had another friend who allowed Mario to use his address. Ella would be on the bus for 30 or 40 minutes, but at least she had found another school that offered girls’ hockey and friends that would help her with the transition to secondary school. Many of her former teammates from her hockey league also attended there. Because of her skill, “She became popular, the kingpin that helped the team succeed,” Mario said.

During one of our last interviews, a call came for Mario from a superintendent of education. It concerned Ella’s physical education mark, which at mid-term was 84%, but dropped on the final to 77. Ella thought that the teacher had turned on her, although that teacher seemed to like her previously. She would accept marks she considered fair, but this situation upset her. Mario agreed. He thought that the teacher was abusing her power. Previously, Mario had unsuccessfully appealed to the vice-principal and the principal. He had also researched the curriculum guidelines, and the rights of parents regarding marks. He found that no objective data or rubric existed for physical education that he could use in her defence and that all those marks came from the teacher’s observations. He argued that a mid-term mark 7% higher than
the final gave the student a false sense of security. When he asked for a re-evaluation, all authorities including the superintendent denied him.

For post-secondary, Ella chose the University of New Brunswick, which was famous for its fine hockey program. But she quit in the first month. She said that she could not make the hockey team because the coaches gave the positions to the children of townspeople they knew. She also found life in residence uncomfortable. She dressed like a boy and the other girls pranced around in their underwear. Like her brother, she decided to take a year off. At the time of this writing, Ella had enrolled in psychology at Ryerson University. And she was happily surprised to learn that Ryerson had a pretty good hockey team that welcomed her.

Reflections

The vicious cycle of failure. Mario’s story illustrates a vicious cycle. Poor treatment by the school leads to discouragement, disengagement, and poor conduct. Helpful, compassionate teaching encourages students to become positive, effective learners. The cruelty of the system begets anti-social student behaviour which in turn provokes the school to apply more harsh punishments.

Schooling gets better. Mario’s story offers some hope that schools in Ontario have improved over the last 60 years. The problems that he experienced in the fifties and sixties have gradually diminished through reforms, more enlightened practices, and services such as ESL and special education. In the fifties, teachers treated Mario as a bad child. Today, most teachers would attribute such behaviour to his learning disability, and his second language problem. During the time of his elementary and secondary schooling, supports such as ESL instruction and special education were not offered to Mario. Today, failing one subject no longer keeps a student back a whole year.

Getting and giving help. In the psychiatric facility, Mario’s mentor introduced him to great books and key ideas that made him value reading, thinking, and making sense of life. That mentor taught Mario how to educate himself, not how to fit in at school. That came later, in college, where Mario’s instructors gave him recognition. Gradually, with tutoring and the help of teachers and friends, he learned how to succeed at school. Despite his challenges, he had one great gift: others wanted to help him. Throughout college, teachers’ college, and university, Mario happened upon people who were generous with their time, explaining, tutoring, and editing for him. After he became a teacher he took many additional qualification courses and grew to love learning through course work.
For his children, Mario slaved at finding compatible schooling and communicating with teachers on their behalf. He spoke well of school to his children, especially for its ability to help students advance in society.

**Teachers “with a degree in child sadism.”** During Mario’s elementary years, many teachers took pride in their ability to have control over their students. As Mario put it, “they felt they had the right to humiliate, strap, and punish their young charges.” They were aware neither of their own psychopathology nor of the deep and lasting damage that they inflicted on these young people.

**Retention.** Mario’s story illustrates the foolishness of retaining or failing students. His story supports the research that goes back to the 1920s (Elkind, 1981) that shows that failure does nothing to improve learning. One might expect the child to have an advantage because he had studied the material the previous year. Instead, the retained student tends to reoccupy the bottom ranks of his new class of younger classmates.

**Privilege.** The notion of lack of privilege, of being the immigrant, and the outsider dominates Mario’s story. As an individual, a sociology major, and a school negotiator, Mario worked to put his children into elite positions: upper-middle-class schools outside the neighbourhood, choir school, and gifted programs. In this regard Mario tried to protect his children from the cultural disadvantages that he had suffered. What he missed was the fact that his children were already privileged by being the children of two well-paid professionals, schoolteachers who owned two properties, so that much of this effort was unnecessary. He missed out on providing his children with classmates that could be friends living in the neighbourhood.

**Deep education.** Mario’s psychotherapy at his psychiatric facilities shows us what he called “a deep education,” which concerned more than skills such as handwriting and arithmetic. Deep education has to do with understanding one’s self by using subjects such as psychology, literature, and philosophy to seek meaning in life. Once he had dipped his brush in the paint of deep education Mario saw the purpose in academic skills; they were worth the struggle.

**Bibliotherapy.** Mario used the term “bibliotherapy” to describe how he read himself to sanity. The term bibliotherapy, however, is now in the literature. The theory is that “our lives can be changed by what we read, particularly if there is opportunity to discuss what we read with others” (Halsted, 2009, p. 108). Halsted’s words reflect Mario’s experiences at Penetanguishene. He read books and discussed what he learned with his peer mentor. He gained insights and discovered a love of learning.
**The self-taught learner.** Mario was reborn to learning through reading some of the great books, discussing “key ideas” (Whitehead, 1933) with his mentor in the hospital. Mario’s education concerned the great questions such as “Why am I the way I am?” and “How does culture create character?” This type of curriculum gave him the motivation and courage to struggle with dyslexia and ADD. For the rest of his life Mario was a passionate and relentless learner. He found his own accommodations in audio books, The History Channel, AQ courses, and mentors.

**The parental role.** While his wife pursued her PhD, Mario took the lead in the role of caregiver for Michelangelo, and later for Ella. He provided excursions, enrolled them in courses, and chauffeured them from place to place and event to event. Often in marriages one parent will take the lead and do the work of school negotiating while the other either acquiesces or mainly contributes ideas.

**Music and Michelangelo.** Mario had always wanted to sing and play an instrument. Even before Michelangelo was born, Mario decided that his child would get what he himself had missed. Mario had Paulina play Mozart to him in the womb. Mario took him to toddler’s music classes and bought him a child’s keyboard when he was four. By age six, he could play a tune on that toy, so he started piano lessons. By age eight, he successfully auditioned for the choir school, where he remained until Grade 12. He spent nine years at that school surrounded by those who were talented in music. Mario noted that, since leaving the choir school, Michelangelo has never sat down to play the piano again.

**Fighting the last war.** Just as generals are always prepared to fight the last war, some school negotiators may try to defend their child from the school suffering they endured, even though the circumstances are different. Mario always felt he lived at the bottom of the social ladder, in both school and society. Therefore, he pressed his children into these “elite” situations.

I, too, fought the last war. Through two or three years of my schooling I felt desperately lonely. Therefore I was never concerned with elite schools for Liam, and have instead concentrated on its opposite, targeting nearby schools where his friends could visit easily.

**Accountability.** When Mario went to battle for seven marks for Ella he claimed that he was holding the system to account. Ella’s physical education teacher had no objective data to support her marks. He compared his holding school to account with recent improvement in police accountability such as cameras in police cars: both teachers and police are in positions of authority. Mario claimed that he called the system into account on behalf of his child, but also
for other disenfranchised parents. He also approved of the creation of the College of Teachers in 1997 for holding teachers to account.

**Sexuality.** Michelangelo found his place as a gay student in a boy’s choir school. He found a community of gay friends. Unlike some gay students who have been driven to suicide by homophobes and bullies in secondary school, Michelangelo did not need the encouragement of a program such as It Gets Better (Savage & Miller, 2011). He happened upon a place that accepted him.

Mario has had to advocate for Ella because she was teased for appearing masculine. Mario reported no such incidents in secondary school. However, when she went to the University of New Brunswick, she suffered. She reported no teasing or bullying, however she felt that she could not fit in. She found the girls’ dormitory too sexualized. The girls would brazenly talk of their sex lives. Ella could not stand it and had to leave.

For one child, being gay did not impede education or the development of a social life. For the other, sexual identity impinged on grade school and drove her out of her first university.

**Teaching styles.** Mario experienced a primitive school system as a child. However, he also suffered as a teacher. Mario was a teacher who could be extremely intuitive, imaginative, and funny. He created an honest rapport with students, especially troubled students. I considered these qualities to be remarkable. But his approach would often seem so non-conformist that it would alarm his supervisors so that much of the last 15 years of his career he spent trying to check his spontaneity. He became more conservative, controlled, and “professional.” I concluded from Mario’s experience that the system prefers that teachers exhibit regularity and predictability to heart and originality.

**Tough negotiators.** Mario makes a tough school negotiator. He called to account his daughter’s teachers, principals, and one superintendent. Many parents fear that, if they criticize a teacher, that teacher will later take it out on their child, so they keep their silence. I asked him if he was afraid that his complaints would affect Ella’s relationship with the teachers, but he claimed that it would cause them to be more careful with her and other children in the future.
Anna: The Woman who Needed to Keep her Child Safe

Introduction

At the young age of 7, because her parents led dysfunctional lives, Anna took on the responsibility of caring for her young siblings, aged 4 and 2. When Anna’s first child was traumatized by bullies, Anna could not protect her. When she had her second child years later, she fully committed to keeping him safe. With him, Anna realized how important negotiating school was.

Connection

I first met Anna in a North York school in the spring of 1991. At that time she was a Grade 5 teacher, very much interested in the arts. As a consultant in the TCDSB’s North York region, I was promoting the spoken arts. Anna’s principal had suggested that she would make a great co-ordinator of a region-wide spoken arts poetry festival, a role which she agreed to take on. After working intensely on that project together for more than six weeks we became fast friends and have kept in touch ever since. When Liam was young, Anna and Paul would sometimes visit with us.

Background

Family Life. Anna was born in 1959 and grew up as the eldest child of a pair of alcoholics living in Toronto’s Regent Park public housing complex. The family lived on welfare while her father, Stan, took occasional work for cash as a roofer. Her mother, Natasha, did some babysitting but by the time Anna was 7, her mother’s drinking problem had escalated to the point that she was no help to her children. Therefore Anna assumed the mantle of parental guardian to her 4-year-old sister Katarina, and her 2-year-old brother Peter.

She would prepare meals, clean the house, and came home from school at noon to see that they had lunch. Her brother was a difficult child, fond of playing with matches and making mayhem. Taking on these parental responsibilities made Anna a very resourceful, resilient, forceful child, more cautious and alert to danger than her peers.

Schooling. As her brother and sister came of age, she ensured that they made it to school on time. They attended the local Catholic school, St. Francis. She was their fierce protector. There was something wonderful about this school. Most of the teachers had a vocation for serving the underprivileged, and they particularly appreciated Anna. Her teachers knew that she was a child of alcoholics, and gave her encouragement. The respect and consideration she received at school helped to make up for the neglect at home.
For secondary school she attended St. Catherine, an all-girls Catholic school. By now, with her sister in Grade 6 and her brother in Grade 4, and both under the protection of those same caring teachers at St. Francis, Anna could pay attention to her own life. At St. Catherine, she thrived. Again the teachers appreciated not only her energy and hard work but her fine intelligence. She was equally successful in the humanities as in the sciences. Her averages in every grade were in the high 80s, which would equal today’s mid 90s. She joined the debating club, the soccer team, and, in Grade 12, won the vice-president position on the student council. That year, her marks averaged 89%, which, if maintained in Grade 13, would earn her many scholarships to university.

Adult life. Unfortunately for Anna, adult life came too soon. The young man with the motorcycle who said he loved her abandoned her soon after getting her pregnant. By May of her Grade 13 year, she was due. She wanted nothing to do with “that guy.” Better-connected or more loving families certainly would have found a way for Anna to continue her schooling unabated. In such a family, the grandparents might have looked after the baby. One thing was certain in Anna’s mind: her mother would have nothing to do with her baby.

Fortunately for Anna, two teachers at St. Francis, Tony Romero and Isabel Costa, had married. Now their first child, Sophia, was 2 and Isabel planned to return to teaching. They owned a house in a middle-class neighbourhood in north Toronto and they wanted Anna to move in and be their nanny and housekeeper. The position included a large room for Anna and her baby, board, and a decent salary. But most importantly, the position meant living with former teachers and friends who loved her.

Anna’s daughter Maria came from the hospital to her first home, the Romero’s house. The baby was healthy and so was Anna. Isabel was still on leave until September, so for four months Isabel helped Anna with Maria as much as Anna helped Isabel with Sophia. By September she was able to take on her full-time nanny and housekeeping duties and receive her full salary, most of which she socked away into savings.

Through the guidance department at St. Catherine, she made arrangements with her Grade 13 teachers to receive her credits based on term marks so long as she completed her final assignments and tests at home before September. This she easily accomplished, which put her in position to begin continuing education that fall at Woodsworth College, U of T, taking one English and one psychology course.

This period of living with the Romeros lasted four years and was the happiest time of her life. Finally she was a member of a sane family. During this time, Anna took two university
courses in the evenings and two in the summer. Her parents now were coping with their alcoholism with the help of AA, so she was free from the guilt of leaving her brother and sister with them.

Anna worked 10 hour days from 7:30 to 5:30, with weekends off. Her day began with making breakfast, followed by taking the girls to the park or community centre for the morning. Some days she would take Sophia and Maria to visit other stay-at-home mothers, or invite them over. They would join other mothers on trips to the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario Science Centre, or the Metro Toronto Zoo. When at home in the afternoon, she would provide activities for Sophia, while Maria took a nap. Then Anna could make the beds, do the dishes, and tackle other housekeeping chores. By 4:30 p.m. she was working on supper to serve by 5:30. Then, when her shift was over, Tony and Isabel relieved her (including minding Maria) so she could switch to her university course work.

At first Sophia hated Maria, but by that first January when Maria could walk and Sophia was 3, Sophia took a real liking to her little companion. Summer came and the extended family rented a cottage for the last two weeks of August. The following year was much like the first except that by the end of that summer Anna had achieved eight credits, or half of her three-year bachelor’s degree. The next year followed the same pattern, but in September, Sophia went off to afternoon kindergarten. Anna’s arrangement with Tony and Isabel continued, nevertheless. Now she and Maria walked Sophia to school for 8:30 a.m. and back home at 11:30.

Moving house. The same arrangement continued the following year when Sophia was in senior kindergarten. That June, Sophia graduated from kindergarten, while that summer Anna completed her BA. Meanwhile, things were changing in the Romero family. Because Sophia was in Grade 1 she no longer needed a nanny. Isabel was pregnant again and had decided to take a year or two off to look after the baby. She would not need a nanny and, in fact, would need Anna and Maria’s room for the new child. So Anna and the Romeros decided to part ways, but she was doing well now.

Negotiating School

Maria’s schooling. That fall, Maria enrolled for JK in the same school that Sophia attended. Anna rented a flat in the neighbourhood. Because there was an opening for a teacher assistant in that school, and Anna was well-known there, the principal offered her the position. Maria went to morning kindergarten, and in the afternoon one of Maria’s classmates’ mothers provided her lunch and minded her for pay at her house. By 4:00 p.m., Anna could pick up her
daughter and take her home. She had the third floor in a cozy house with reasonable rent, and Anna and Maria stayed close to Tony and Isabel.

Anna loved being able to go to work while also keeping an eye on her child. After assisting teachers for two years, she realized that she had the skills to become a teacher herself. With her high marks and her experience as a teacher assistant, the faculty of education at the University of Toronto accepted her. Thanks to her savings, she was able to take a year off work, during which she would walk Maria to school for Grade 1 and then rush off to her classes.

In school, Maria presented herself as a sensitive, quiet, even eccentric child. She had her small circle of friends of like character, but the more sociable girls found her unusual. This may have led to unkindness, but the teachers managed the classes well and made everyone respect, or at least tolerate, uniqueness.

Meanwhile, Anna graduated and found work as a Grade 1 teacher not too far from home. She and Maria stayed in the same house up until Maria’s Grade 2 year, when, with her increased salary, Anna was able to take a better ground-floor rental with two bedrooms and a spacious back yard. They stayed in this comfortable home until Maria’s Grade 8 year.

At that time Anna decided to purchase a house which meant that Maria would need to leave her group of close-knit friends in her middle-class neighbourhood. Real estate was more affordable where Anna decided to purchase, but the neighbourhood was poorer and rougher.

Placing fragile Maria in a local secondary school could have been hazardous, however Anna and Maria had a plan. Since Grade 6, Maria had aspired to attend Jane Austen Academy, which prized high academic achievement and empowerment for young women. In Grade 8 she aced the entrance examination. Not only did the school accept her, but offered her a $10,000 scholarship, leaving Anna only $8000 to pay in Grade 9. Thrifty Anna felt confident she could afford the $18,000 yearly tuition; in fact, she considered such a placement a necessity.

Problems arise. Anna and Maria had misunderstood Jane Austen Academy, catering to the rich and academically successful did not make the students kind or tolerant. Being quiet, introspective, and socially inept made Maria a perfect candidate for the position of “victim of bullying.” Without her group of friends from elementary school, Maria was defenceless. She quickly became the favourite target of a venomous group of mean girls who spread vicious rumours about her. This group was led by a girl named Susan who took a personal interest in making Maria’s life miserable. All of these bullying girls looked up to Susan and did whatever she asked. They constantly belittled Maria and played pranks on her. They would make fun of Maria’s diet, clothing, and posture. They would throw gum or eraser bits in her hair, badmouth
Maria felt such shame about her helplessness that she kept her plight secret from Anna. But Anna, of course, noted that Maria brought no new friends home, although she did keep in touch with her grade school circle, particularly a boy named Andrew. She became moody, anxious, and more withdrawn than usual. The family doctor decided that she was depressed and prescribed the antidepressant Paxil. It is unclear whether he even heard her story.

Despite the medication, her dark thoughts were almost unbearable. She survived Grade 9, but Grade 10 was a nightmare. By October, Anna took Maria to a psychiatrist who gleaned from her the story of being bullied. When Anna heard of it, she reacted strongly. Because of her experience as a teacher, she thought that she could stop it. She took time off work to tackle the problem. She discussed the matter with the school principal. She interviewed all of Maria’s teachers. Nobody showed any great concern. She even tracked down some of the parents of the offending girls and paid them house calls. Anna confronted Susan’s parents, but they shrugged it off and told her to get off the porch, siding with their daughter. In 1992, bullying was not considered the great wrong that it is at the time of this writing.

Back at the school the story went out that Maria’s mother “was crazy.” Maria told Anna that she had made everything worse. Anna decided to transfer her to the local public school. Anna and the psychiatrist felt hopeful about this new start. Unfortunately, one of Susan’s gang had also transferred to that same school. Once there, she spread all of the stories from the old school to the new one, and a whole new gang of bullies made Maria their victim. Anna was once again furious, arranging meetings with administrators, teachers, and parents. Meanwhile, Maria’s mental state collapsed. She got into screaming fits with Anna. She was now too traumatized for any school. Her only solace was her friendship with Andrew, whom she telephoned regularly. He was also a victim of bullying, and his parents also were at their wits’ end trying to protect him.

**Escape from bullying.** In the end, Maria found her own solution with Andrew’s family. His uncle Max lived in British Columbia and ran his own adventure tour company. Max was a self-made man who had quit school at age 16 and hitchhiked to British Columbia to work in the lumber industry. Max invited Andrew and Maria to come out and work for him. He suggested that both young people could work as guides, learn about nature, and gain valuable self-confidence. Max knew that time spent in the outdoors has a healing effect and would help these young people recover from the torment of high school. After meeting Andrew’s parents and
discussing the details of the plan, Anna realized that this idea was Maria’s best chance to escape her terrible situation. And so Maria quit school and headed west at age 16.

Anna suffered two years of mourning and self-criticism. “Why was I so involved in my own career that I failed to see what was happening to my daughter?” she asked herself. But over time it became clear that Maria had made a good choice and Anna got over her guilt. After a year or two Andrew and Maria got past their high school traumas and became quite confident and competent. They would eventually marry, have two children, and open their own gallery, selling works of art to tourists. Meanwhile, Anna met Stephen, a lawyer, who owned his own successful firm. They fell in love and got married in 1995. They had a child, a boy they named Paul. Anna said that she would like to stay home with their child, and make sure that he was safe and taken care of. Stephen said that that was a good idea.

Caring for Paul. In the summer they would frequent the local park where Paul would mix it up with other toddlers in the sandbox. In winter, Anna would take Paul to one of the Toronto schools that had a drop-in centre for parents with their preschool children. As with Liam, living outside daycare had difficulties. She worked hard finding her son companions. Paul learned German from his father, whose family had emigrated from Switzerland when he was 8. Stephen also gave Paul art lessons. By age 4 he was a very confident, articulate lad who had learned to read.

Kindergarten public school. During Paul’s preschool years, he and his parents became a very tightly-knit unit. Anna concerned herself especially with Paul’s safety and with whom he interacted. In September 2000, when Paul turned 4, it was time to hand him over to the care of the kindergarten teacher at Franklin Avenue School, where he was placed with 18 other 4-year-olds.

Anna was horrified by the dangers (real or imagined) of this new arrangement. Instead of handing him over and leaving, she negotiated with the school for the right to attend the class all morning, every day. The teacher tried to involve her in activities that would benefit the whole class, but she devoted herself exclusively to watching over her own son. Unlike other parent volunteers, she had no interest in the programme, helping the teacher, or helping other children. Anna was only there to protect Paul: She worried that Paul would fall down or get hit. Anna was convinced that Paul was accident prone, and it turned out that Paul did have a problem with his vision that was corrected with glasses.

Running in the schoolyard and keeping up with the children tired out this 43-year-old mother. She found it all very uncomfortable and not nearly as educative as Paul’s preschool life
at home. After attending JK for several months, Anna realized that she wanted less school for Paul. So, for SK, she withdrew Paul completely from school and homeschooled him.

**Partial homeschooling.** In Grade 1, Anna launched a program of partial homeschooling: timesharing between learning at home and in the school, a program which was approved by the school’s principal at that time. She schooled Paul at home part-time, following the program of his teacher at Franklin and keeping up with her pace in those subjects. For mathematics, science, and social studies, when the class was on chapter five, she was on chapter five. But for language arts and visual arts she allowed herself to be creative, teaching her own program. For subjects with specialized teachers, such as gym, French, library, and music, Anna brought Paul to the school. During these classes she would sit in. These arrangements for partial homeschooling were quite in line with Board policy (TDSB, 2008).

Anna, however, felt anxious that the school’s principal could cut the program at his whim. Whenever she was in the school she kept a low profile and avoided making any comments or criticisms (which could be difficult for a former teacher of her drive and competence). She worked hard to maintain her cordial but distant relationship with the staff. In Grade 4 a new principal took charge and, despite the Board policy of co-operating with homeschoolers, he expressed some irritation, hinting that it was time for Paul to attend full-time. (And it turned out that he was right.)

**Full-time public school.** In Grade 5 Paul and his father pressed Anna to let him return to school full-time. She acquiesced, but had concerns: She believed that the teacher worked the students too hard, making learning arduous. In her practice as a teacher, she valued play and student-centred learning, and she critiqued the teacher’s writing program. The strict adherence to rubrics with their criteria and models interfered with flow, making it hard for the students to express themselves freely. Changing from part-time to full-time school certainly caused Anna some anxiety. But soon it was clear that Paul felt happier and so she relaxed.

One might assume that Paul’s homeschooling and partial schooling had isolated him from his peers. In fact he had made friends while attending part-time. Now, attending full-time, his classmates welcomed him into their social circle and their homes. This happy development did not come without concerns from Anna. One of the boys who most engaged with Paul had a behaviour problem that worried Anna.

During his Grade 6 year Paul underwent testing which led to a gifted designation. Paul could have attended a gifted class in a Grade 7 and 8 school, but Anna and Stephen determined that that particular school was unsafe. She also was wary of any gifted class in a far-off school.
Even Paul expressed concerns that the regular students likely would resent students bestowed with the title of “gifted.”

And so they began to shop for private schools, setting their sights first on TPS (Toronto Progressive School). Surprisingly, despite his gifted designation, Paul did not pass the TPS entrance examination. While the family felt badly about that, they put it down to Paul’s test-taking skills. They later heard that affluent families applying to the prestigious TPS usually hired test-taking coaches and practised taking similar tests. Paul wrote that test without such help.

**Holy Trinity.** They moved on, this time applying to Holy Trinity, a private Catholic school owned by the Christian Brothers who, in 1992, had taken Holy Trinity out of the TCDSB. That year, the principal, a Christian Brother, informed the TCDSB that his school would operate as a special education school or an academic school, but not both. The Board argued that such a school contravened the Ministry’s policy concerning the integration of special education students. The Christian Brothers then chose to decline funding, returning to the private school status Catholic secondary schools had before 1986.

While the building itself had a 100-year-old history and beautiful grounds, a friend of Anna’s warned her that the administration was authoritarian. The principal’s idea of collaborative decision making was to tell parents: “If you don’t like it here, you’re free to leave.” Nevertheless, when Paul passed the entrance examination the family decided to try it out beginning in Grade 7. Paul did very well there academically, but at first suffered a bit of friction from the boys, some of whom had been there since Grade 3. The girls, however, liked him.

As usual, Anna was concerned with Paul’s safety. She picked up Paul after school every day. One day, the school dismissed the students early without giving any notice to parents. Anna complained, but the principal shrugged it off, saying “We sometimes have these meetings. We can’t announce every one.”

Anna then attended a school advisory council meeting which included parents, teachers, administrators, and the school’s board of directors. Very soon she realized that the board had no power. Instead, the principal, appointed by the Christian Brothers, controlled everything. Anna resented this hierarchical structure reminiscent of the Catholic Church she had quit long ago, but Paul had made friends and settled in, so leaving would have been hard on him.

One day in Grade 8 Paul was in the hallway at his locker. While strolling by, the principal smacked him quite hard on the back. He said nothing and kept moving. Paul had no idea why he was hit. Was this the principal’s idea of a joke? Had Paul been too loud in the
hallway? Stephen thought it was just old school roughhousing, while Anna worried that the principal might be attracted to Paul. Whatever the reason, Anna was not pleased, but never complained. She knew how the principal would respond: “If you do not like this school, you are free to leave.”

Although it went against Anna’s nature to leave Paul in a potentially unsafe environment, Paul assured her that this was a minor, isolated incident, and not to fret. Fortunately nothing like it ever happened again.

Students at Holy Trinity had passed an entrance examination, could work hard, and came from affluent families. The student population was serious, committed, and academic. One would assume that the quality of the instruction would reflect the potential of the students. Nevertheless, Anna, Paul, and Stephen found the teaching to be unimaginative and the quantity of work unnecessarily onerous. The school had no rational plan for gifted education; the Grade 9 mathematics students were simply taught from Grade 10 text books. Holy Trinity was an academic, traditional school, with teacher-centred instruction and no idea of how to meet the students’ individual needs.

Anna told me a story of one of Paul’s teacher’s bizarre teaching methods. For his Grade 12 English class, this teacher spent class time not on English literature but on his own theory of Western civilization. He claimed that Galileo and other modern philosophers were responsible for a decline in morality in the West. If students wrote essays supporting this viewpoint, they received an A; otherwise they earned a C no matter how well they argued their thesis. This insult to intelligence so upset Anna and Stephen that they pulled Paul from the class and sent him to summer school at another private school for the credit.

Often Anna and her husband regretted choosing the school. However, they made no change because Paul had set down roots there. After graduating he went to the University of Toronto. At first he majored in English. Next he found a passion for biology. Post graduate studies and a career were not yet determined at the time of this writing.

Reflections

Trust. When parents place their children into a school, they expect that the school will not only educate but protect. They trust that this institution will treat their child with care and respect. When this trust is broken, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to repair it. Those parents who felt their trust was betrayed may tend to negotiate school aggressively, seeking more radical alternatives.
Mean girls. Bullying did not receive much attention in the early 1990s when Maria went to secondary school. The notion that female bullying could be just as harmful as male bullying (if not more) was not yet recognized. Male bullies will use assault, threats, and ostracism. But female bullies work better with words. Psychological warfare left Maria emotionally wounded, which took a drastic change of circumstances and many years to reverse.

Kindness of strangers. While Anna encountered many people who made life painful for her and her children (her parents, Maria’s tormentors, various principals), she also met others who helped (the teachers at St. Francis, especially the Romeros; Andrew’s uncle; Paul’s teachers who allowed Anna to sit in on his classes in his early years). Fortunately, the positive persons in her life helped her overcome the negative forces.

Advocacy. Maria’s story teaches us the limits of parental advocacy and how it can fail or even backfire despite a parent’s good intentions. On behalf of Maria, Anna battled fiercely to no avail. In fact, Maria claimed she made matters worse. With Paul, Anna was more cautious. Although Anna had many issues to complain about, particularly at Holy Trinity, she restrained herself. She feared that, if she complained, the administration would ask Paul to leave. She advocated judiciously.

A second chance. Parents having children at different points in their life (with a significant time span between them) allows the parents to reflect on their mistakes and successes, to do differently what they did for their first child. They may feel more protective and solicitous of the second child than they did the first. It is a chance to do better.

Mending relationships. Anna’s relationship with her daughter suffered during Maria’s high school years. However, after Maria’s move west, when life began to improve for her, she gradually stopped blaming her mother. At the same time, Anna began to forgive herself. Being vigilant about Paul’s concerns and safety at school helped. While it took time, Anna and Maria eventually overcame their rift and resumed regular contact.

Intensive parenting at odds with institutional schooling. Intensive parents (Arai, 2000; Aurini & Davies, 2005) have enough money to really treasure and protect their children. At age 4, the school system asks them to hand over the child to the kindergarten teacher. The child for the first time joins a tribe of some 20 other children. At this time the harmonious little family grouping may resent the state-run situation, which has its large number of children for every teacher. The parent-caregiver has a different approach to education, usually responding to the child’s self-directed questions, while schools have certain predetermined outcomes that society expects them to deliver.
School adaptations. After reaching school age, the child then becomes a worker. The change is sharp. And at this point, some of my participants and my family chose to delay institutional schooling and became alternative schoolers, partial homeschoolers, or full-time homeschoolers.

It was an interesting choice for Anna to switch to a partial homeschooling program during Paul’s Grade 1 to Grade 4 years. The year before that she had switched from Paul attending JK (with Anna) to Paul being homeschooled throughout SK. These adaptations showed not only that Anna was able to cater to Paul’s needs, but also to recognize the limitations of her own homeschooling strategy. Partial homeschooling provided Paul both teachers of specialized subjects and a social network.

Partial schooling and the Board. The Ministry and school boards have policies that support partial homeschoolers, providing them the school subjects they request (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002; Toronto District School Board, 2008). Such policies benefit the Board because the Ministry of Education provides funding for these students, despite their not being in school for the whole day.

As we saw with the principal who blocked Allan’s son’s entrance to his neighbourhood school, principals can become a law unto themselves. They assume powers that the Ministry and Board never gave them. Often, they are unaware of policies. Sometimes they bluff. The public flees or obeys, fearing to challenge. And so Anna had to tip-toe around the new principal at Franklin, fearing an ultimatum: join full-time or leave, starkly contrasting solutions neither in the interest of the parent nor the Board. The stress this caused Anna could have been avoided with properly implemented and communicated policy.

Teacher for one. Anna loved teaching and worked to become the most qualified, excellent teacher she could be. How could she quit when Paul came along? Anna found her satisfaction as a teacher through teaching Paul. She made sure that he was as safe, well educated, and prepared for life as possible. While she had a class of just one, it was enough to satisfy her drive to teach at that time.

Keeping children safe. Anna as a child acted as custodian of her two siblings and valued their safety and happiness. Then, as a mother, the random, traumatic bullying that occurred during Maria’s secondary school years for a time hurt her relationship with her daughter. When Paul came into her life, she vowed to be more vigilant. Right up until the end of Grade 4, Anna closely monitored whoever taught or played with him. After Paul went to school full-time, Anna eventually relaxed. Ironically, the worst incident, the Holy Trinity principal
smacking Paul on the back, Anna let pass without complaint. She now realized that perfect protection was impossible, and complete safety cannot be guaranteed.
Lara: The Girl Who Realized that School is Fake

Introduction

At age seven, when Lara moved from a child-centred progressive school to a traditional and regimented school, she was devastated. She fell from the top of the class to the bottom; she could not spell or recite her times tables, and the teacher called her stupid. But over the summer between Grade 2 and 3, her father taught her the tables, her parents hired a tutor, and by the first months of Grade 3 she was back at the top of the class. She learned that with help and understanding, you can adjust to the school system so that it cannot hurt you. “One day I’ll run this thing and show them how it’s done properly,” she thought back when she was just eight. That day came when she had children of her own and homeschooled them.

Connection

I met Lara in September, 2000, in the JK/SK class at the alternative school where her eldest daughter Marion was in JK and Liam was in SK. The following year I clashed with the new Grade 1 teacher and quit the school. Lara decided that the new SK teacher was completely mad and quit as well. We teamed up to work out school together. We started by researching other schools but found them unsatisfactory. I wrote up a prospectus for a school where Lara would teach and I would administrate but Lara’s real interest turned out to be homeschooling. We had many adventures that year of homeschooling, but Liam and I returned to St. Demetrius while Lara continued to homeschool her children.

Background

Family life. Lara was born in February of 1965 to Mary Ann and George. She had no brothers or sisters. Until she was seven, she lived in Toronto on Albany Avenue, in an architecturally famous apartment building.

Lara’s mother took a maternity leave of three months and then returned to work. After those three months Lara went for childcare to an elderly Polish lady in a house nearby. This lady, whom Lara called “Ma,” took care of her until she was 4, whereupon Lara went to junior kindergarten. Lara loved Ma, who took her on excursions, fed her pirogues, and gave her a great deal of care and attention. Lara said that she would later emulate Ma in the manner that she dealt with children, both her own and others.

Mary Ann held a job as a teller at the Bank of Montreal three blocks from her home. During Lara’s JK and SK years Mary Ann worked part-time so that when Lara was not at school, her mother minded her. In Grade 1 and 2, Mary Ann returned to full-time work. After school, Lara went to her mother’s bank just down the street. While her mother worked upstairs,
she helped the clerks in the basement for an hour or two. She stayed happy and busy there and remembered, with pleasure, using the bank’s stamp. Mary Ann eventually moved to the bank’s head office. By retirement she had worked herself up to the position of computer analyst and, by the time I met her, she and George were living off her substantial early retirement package.

George left school at age 15 when his parents died. His 30-year-old brother ran the family business and prospered. He lived in Barrie, Ontario, but wanted George to attend and board at Upper Canada College. George would have none of that and hitchhiked out west to work on the oil rigs. George, who passed away in 2005, was intelligent and self-taught in philosophy, anthropology, and ornithology. He was a political activist, leftist, and Vietnam War protestor. George worked for the U of T book store but after several years he started his own business, buying and selling rare books. Later in life George came to regret his lack of a formal education and therefore was worried about Lara’s homeschooling project.

That apartment on Albany was a lively place. Friends of George were constantly visiting; Bob Hunter, the environmentalist and founder of Greenpeace would drop in. Vietnam War draft resisters took shelter there. Lara recalled from age 3 Lars from Sweden, who stayed several months. Her family revolved around people, not television. The old black and white television set had only two channels, and it was hardly ever on.

**Madison Street School.** Lara entered JK at Madison Street School and stayed there until the middle of Grade 2. Madison Street ran a child-centered, active learning, and language experience curriculum. Activity centres were the practice. A child was free to leave her seat and go work at the art centre if she pleased. No permissions were needed. Children talked to each other freely. The school was well-organized and progressive. I should know because I trained there as a practice teacher at age 24. Lara was happy and successful, an excellent student at the top of her class. Today she believes that if she had stayed at Madison Street School, she would never have had the experiences that led her to negotiating school for her children by alternative schooling and homeschooling.

**Oakville Elementary School.** In the middle of Grade 2 however, her family moved to Oakville. Lara attended Oakville Elementary School, a traditional school with teacher-directed instruction and textbook learning. There was no moving without permission; there were no art or writing centres. The pedagogy clashed with Madison Street’s. When Lara arrived at Oakville she had no idea how difficult school could be, and was soon behind in her learning.

One day, when Lara finished her assignment, she decided to do what she would normally do at Madison School. She got up to find some art supplies. The teacher, however, was shocked.
How could any seven-year-old have the impudence to take such action without first checking with the teacher: “Are you stupid?” the teacher asked.

Fortunately Lara had a strong-willed and canny father. George immediately lodged a formal complaint about the teacher’s name-calling, which led to a reprimand for the teacher. Next, George got to work on the skills she was failing. He taught Lara her multiplication tables; she remembers charts of times tables covering the walls of her house. “We’ll show them” seemed to be his attitude. He taught her how to use a dictionary. He hired a private tutor, and by the following school year Lara could more than meet the teachers’ traditional expectations. By Grade 3 Lara once again was at the top of her class. Her teacher, Ms. Batten, she described as a “fabulous teacher who loved me.”

Hamilton. In her Grade 4 year the family moved to Hamilton, and Lara went to Hamilton Central Public School. Unlike Oakville, with its rich kids, Hamilton Central catered to working-class students who did badly in school. The girls might beat up on the teacher’s pet. Lara quickly learned two new adaptations to school: first, feign sickness and buy time to figure out what is going on; and second, please the teacher but fail enough to have some friends. She soon stopped being the first to answer the teacher’s questions and deliberately failed some spelling tests.

Oakville. George and Mary Ann concluded that Hamilton was a mistake. They moved back to Oakville the next year, and Grade 5 and 6 Lara described as the “best two years of my life.” One of her teachers, an Englishman named Mr. Corey, was her favourite teacher ever. He reminded her of Mr. Chips, the fictional Latin master at a British boys’ private school. He had a reputation for being tough, but was actually kind. This teacher appreciated art, as did Lara. At the end of the year she won all the awards while being popular and having many good friends.

Gifted school. In Grade 6, when she wrote the Canadian Test for Basic Skills, she got 100% in two tests. This was as great a shock to her as it was to her parents, and led to further testing, followed by admission to the Board’s gifted program. Her parents were very enthusiastic, though it turned out to be a disaster for Lara. The gifted program started in Grade 7 and was held full-time in a school on the other side of Oakville. She had to leave her friends, and travel by school bus, only to find the gifted school students to be rich and snobbish. She hated gifted class. The non-gifted in the building resented the gifted.

First Lara feigned illness to avoid school. Later, she stopped going to school altogether by pretending to leave for class, hiding in the building’s basement, and, after her parents had left for work, returning to her apartment. She would spend the entire day reading books from her
father’s fabulous library and writing journal entries and poetry. Lara said of her father’s library: “He doesn’t have any boring books; everything is wonderful.” The library had books from wall to wall, and books on art, as well as many reproductions from the masters hanging between the shelves. Playboy magazines were included; this library was not censored. Here Lara, at age 12, read the life of John Stuart Mills. For friends during this period, Lara bonded with high school students from the neighbourhood; she would tell them that she went to a private high school somewhere else. Avoiding gifted school continued throughout Grade 7.

The neighbourhood Grade 7/8 school. In Grade 8, Lara transferred to the regular neighbourhood Grade 7 and 8 school. Here, she was rebellious and wild; she tells stories of climbing out of the classroom window. In Grade 8, she decided to shock the home economics teacher by deliberately failing that class.

Grade 9. At the collegiate in Grade 9 she returned to full-time truancy. This time the authorities caught up with her, and her parents felt quite threatened, fearing that the Children’s Aid would take her away. She was sent to a child psychologist who tried to provoke her anger. She felt violated by his methods. During this period, she had boyfriends with cars, she drank, but did not use drugs. She said that her rebellion was philosophical in nature, not about alcohol, drugs, or sex.

Our Lady of Mercy Private Catholic School. To avert a crisis, Lara’s parents placed her in a private Catholic girl’s school, Our Lady of Mercy, in the second term of Grade 9. George was an atheist, Mary Ann a lapsed Catholic. Up until then, Lara had had no religious upbringing. She was admitted to the school after passing an interview with the principal, Sister Amelia. At this small private school of perhaps two hundred girls the nuns were progressive, caring, and dedicated. Those religious women, who were in fact feminists, wanted to shape the girls into strong, independent women. They fostered a spirit of community, with each day beginning with a school meeting in the gymnasium where the entire school would meditate. Without the distractions of fashion, pop culture, and boys, Lara could focus on education and becoming herself. Lara left after Grade 12 when the school closed. She suspects that this community of sisters was too radical for its superiors.

Grade 13. In Grade 13 Lara went to the nearest collegiate. In her view, the teachers lacked the depth, commitment and caring that she received at Our Lady of Mercy. She hated the tone they used with students; it sounded condescending. After two and a half weeks, Lara angrily yelled at a teacher for the rude way he spoke to one of the students and stormed out never to return to Grade 13.
Working. She returned home where George accepted her decision to quit school. At first Mary Ann found her work at the bank. Next she became a receptionist at the local optician’s. The owner, Mr. Kingsley, recognized her practical intelligence and when he started a third store he left her in charge of his second store. Mr. Kingsley was a master of the trade; he could grind and resurface lenses by hand, a dying art, which he taught Lara. He also decided to mentor her, recommending a return to school for her optician’s certificate. He covered her college tuition.

Professional training. Lara went to Georgian College in Barrie to become certified as an optician, a two-year course. She found college easy, saying that many of the courses seemed padded. She found 75% of the professional courses useful, and took two liberal arts electives, psychology and astronomy. The summer involved a co-op placement and Lara graduated with honours the following year.

Once she turned 21, she realized that her lack of a Grade 13 certificate had no consequence in regard to university admission. She now fit within the category of “mature student.” The high achievements required by the academy turned to dust once one learned how to read the fine print. Mature student status reinforced her theory that school is a fake enterprise, like the Wizard of Oz’s sham power. She took six undergraduate credits at McMaster University, Continuing Education, mainly in psychology, but events in her life interrupted her completion of a bachelor’s degree.

Work as an optician. Lara went back to work for Mr. Kingsley. She soon bought a car and a house, moved in with her boyfriend, and enjoyed living comfortably and independently. When she broke up with him, she rented out her house, moved to downtown Toronto, and took a position at a high-society optician on Bloor Street. She built a good reputation in the industry. She was successful at promoting sales in the store due to her charm and intelligence, and sold eyeglasses to the rich and famous such as Karen Kain and David Suzuki. After several years, she left the store and took work as an independent, performing optical examinations on rich customers in their own homes.

Starting a family. When Lara turned 30, she began to think about starting a family, quitting work, and taking care of the household full-time. Unfortunately, her boyfriends were not turning out to be good husband material. Her hair stylist suggested that she meet Richard. Richard’s family owned a hardware store in Port Credit. His parents were born in Germany, while he and his brother were born in Canada. All four worked in the family store. For their first date, he took her out in the store’s van. The two soon moved in to an apartment above the store, renting it from his parents. Richard’s mother took a dislike to Lara. After six months, Lara
decided they should leave. She sold her Oakville house, bought a house with Richard and they started a family. First came Marion, followed two years later by Caroline, then by her son Calvin.

**Negotiating School**

**La Leche League and attachment parenting.** Lara joined the La Leche League, a group for mothers and soon-to-be mothers who gave each other support with breast feeding and mothering. Soon Lara became quite committed to the organization and applied to be a leader. For a volunteer organization, becoming a leader was quite a process: it involved an interview, a two-year apprenticeship, extensive reading, and the recommendation of a sponsor. Once she became a leader, she ran workshops from her house, with her co-leader, Jane. Also Lara was a believer in attachment parenting, a method taught by Dr. Sears (1993). Rather than sleeping alone in a crib, Sears recommended the family bed, in which an infant would sleep with the parents to make nursing easier, and to form bonds with the mother and father.

**Home nursery school.** To supplement the family income, and also to have more companions for Marion, Lara provided daycare for three children. Among those three was Chloe, the daughter of Marie, an elementary school principal, and Hal, a superintendent of education. What these two educators realized immediately was that Lara was running a high-quality home nursery school with a very intelligent curriculum. Hers was not a home daycare where a television occupied the children’s time. Lara also became the protégé of a storyteller and arts teacher, Emily Thomas. She learned Emily’s trade and methods for involving children in language development through stories and the arts. She went on to make an arts-based curriculum for her students. What I recognized when I first visited Lara in her house with her children was how much art, crafts and the making of things encouraged child development and artistic expression. To develop her thinking, Lara read Maria Montessori’s educational theories and the writings of the Waldorf School, particularly Steiner’s original works.

**Lakeshore Alternative School.** When I asked how it came to be that her daughter went to the Lakeshore Alternative School, it turned out that Susan Dayton, who Lara had known for years from the La Leche league, was very involved with LAS and had recommended it to her. (Susan is the wife of Robert, another participant in this study.) There was nothing in particular about the Lakeshore philosophy that appealed to Lara; she just liked the fact that the school administration did not concern itself much with regular attendance. Many parents there partially homeschooled, and partially attended school, which is exactly what Lara wanted. She believed that Marion was not yet ready to leave her mother and go to kindergarten every day.
Lara took a leadership role at LAS: She acted with Susan as a facilitator in the JK/SK parent-teacher meetings. The meetings often dealt with angst and conflict between the teacher and the parents, which caused Lara stress and woe. Later, when Marion went to St. Demetrius, Lara never volunteered for anything.

Mary, the JK/SK teacher was organized, professional, and hard working. That is where Lara and I met, in the JK/SK class, when Marion was in JK and Liam was in SK. Unfortunately Mary did not particularly like the involvement of so many parents in the class even though parent involvement was a key tenet of the LAS philosophy. Mary hoped to get some learning done, while the parents mostly wanted a social life for the children and a meeting place for parents. The classroom curriculum was not high on the parents’ priorities list.

Next year, Lara discovered the new kindergarten teacher, Cecilia, to be so rigid, humourless, and irrational that she could not stand to keep Marion in that school anymore. She said that Cecilia had no feeling for children. Lara and I sought out another well-known alternative school, but we found it wanting. The attempts at using old couches and coffee tables to create a home-like environment seemed tawdry and messy. As we talked with a teacher, the sobbing and crying of a parent in discussion with the school’s principal drowned out our conversation. Lara said that, like LAS, the school suffered from too much emotion.

**Homeschooling.** Lara and I teamed up to practice homeschooling. Together, we attended homeschooling events such as Thursdays at the Williams Centre where many of South Etobicoke’s homeschoolers gathered weekly. We travelled together to Casa Loma, the Toronto Islands, and City Hall for cultural events. Whereas Liam decided to return to traditional schooling for Grade 2, homeschooling was something that Lara stuck with until Marion reached Grade 5. What did Lara do to educate her daughters? For one thing Lara started an after-school art program which Marion and Caroline attended, along with some children from LAS. Liam originally joined, but later was asked not to attend, as Marion wanted another boy’s attention, which Liam was taking away. Lara usually tried to accommodate her daughter’s wishes.

Lara worked hard at keeping up with the Ministry mandated subjects of mathematics, reading, and writing. She sought out learning resources everywhere. She liked some Christian material although she had no religious affiliation. She found a mathematics textbook from the 1970s that she considered more straightforward than today’s. (In fact, that was the textbook her Grade 4 teacher used with her.) When she found a piece of curriculum that worked with her girls, she would become very excited and tell me all about it. As a former consultant with the school board, I had never met any certified teacher who put so much energy into researching
material for her students as did Lara, the self-taught teacher. I sometimes asked her when she planned to enrol at an education faculty, but she would shrug off my compliment, dismissing conventional teaching. She also hired private instructors who each came with a formal program of study.

When the lessons got tough and the girls became frustrated, Lara might chastise them. She then would feel guilty and make fun of herself for losing her patience, and they would put away their workbooks and play for the rest of the day. Switching back and forth from the roles of mother and children to the roles of teacher and students was hard on them. Lara had always been a permissive mother; she liked to give them what they asked for. She liked to spend money on them, and if the girls wanted something, Lara would do whatever she could to get it for them. I viewed her approach as educational; she wanted to show her daughters what the world had to offer and to see where their desires took them.

Despite the acquisition of professionally-written subject matter, Lara’s approach to education was very much driven by the children’s interests. I would call her a follower of John Dewey. For example, the girls liked My Little Pony. Once the girls expressed interest in the ponies, that subject became the storytelling, the numbers, and the subject matter. The girls’ rooms would become a wall-to-wall gallery of hundreds of these horses, until something else became the subject. Sometimes the girls would celebrate a birthday for one of their dolls. Lara and the girls would throw a party, with music and little cakes, after days of preparation. Whatever it was that appealed to her daughters at the time became the experience for teaching language, reading, and writing. The main thrust of Lara’s philosophy was language experience. A topic of interest would emerge, which Lara would use to teach many skills.

Ironically, although Lara’s father George was a maverick himself, he disapproved of her homeschooling. Instead, George supported institutional schooling because he had missed out on it. Lara was taken aback. She had counted on George supporting her non-conformity.

Calvin. Lara’s son Calvin had a difficult birth; the umbilical cord had briefly cut off his oxygen supply. This caused problems, which became more apparent as he grew older. He could get frustrated and lash out easily. One of his symptoms, terrible headaches, was alleviated through surgery. Calvin’s condition included some autistic characteristics. Taking care of a child with Calvin’s difficulties along with homeschooling two other children would defeat most parents.

St. Demetrius. When Marion reached Grade 5 she insisted on going to school at St. Demetrius. Besides Liam, her best friend went there, and, when Marion visited her friend’s
house, she came to meet many of the other girls at St. Demetrius. She yearned more and more for a regular school and to have friends like everyone else.

Although St. Demetrius was not the local school, it was under capacity and so could accept students from outside its boundaries. Lara was never baptised Catholic, nor was her husband. However, Lara’s mother was baptized, so she doctored her mother’s baptismal certificate to make it her own. The school secretary did not vet such documents stringently, and so Marion was admitted. Meanwhile, Caroline and Calvin continued to be homeschooled.

While Marion was at St. Demetrius, Lara communicated closely with two teachers there. She had a good experience with Ms. Macey in Grade 5, who understood the larger goal of creating a smooth and happy transition for Marion’s initiation in a traditional school. Ms. Macey showed a willingness to discuss Marion’s learning style with Lara and Lara shared her perspective as a homeschooling parent. The positive exchange with Ms. Macey led Lara to place her trust in the school and to enrol Marion in Grade 6.

At first the Grade 6 teacher, Mr. McDonald, seemed funny and relaxed, a good fit for Marion. While homeschooling, Lara had worked hard to keep Marion up to grade level in reading, writing, and mathematics. Nevertheless, as time passed Marion began to get terrible marks in the mathematics quizzes and tests.

Lara asked Mr. McDonald to give Marion special attention. He refused and said, “After a while she will catch on, but for now she will be get poor marks.” Marion then found school to be a terrible place. I drafted a complaint for Lara to present to the principal, but she declined. Lara hated conflict and instead removed Marion from the school to rejoin Caroline and Calvin homeschooling.

When Lara decided to withdraw Marion from St. Demetrius, she investigated the Waldorf school, which she found to have a beautiful philosophy. Lara, however, concluded that the school would have been ideal for her as a child, but not for Marion. Marion rejected it based on her opinion of one of the teachers there. Lara considered the Waldorf students who had been there since kindergarten quite advanced. She feared that if Marion went there she would compare herself to them unfavourably and feel badly about herself.

**Private lessons.** In addition to buying learning materials and inventing study units, Lara, throughout homeschooling, bought private lessons. Lara argued that by providing lessons in piano, drama, dance, art, German, horseback riding, and even yoga, she had spent an amount comparable to a private school tuition, but she and the children still controlled the curriculum.
When unhappy with any instructor, she ended the relationship by making up an excuse. She hated conflict and feared hurting anyone’s feelings.

The girls also participated in small classes organized by homeschoolers. Parents would meet, perhaps hire a teacher, and organize a play, a musical, or some other event. These projects involved writing plots, reading scripts, acting, making costumes, and designing sets. These activities were similar to the child-centred integrated interest projects that Lara and the girls carried out at home. They included a community of homeschooled children which helped make up for the classmates the girls lacked.

Beyond these temporary arrangements, Lara attempted to build long-term liaissons with homeschooling families. These were always problematic. On one hand there were the Christian homeschoolers, who Lara found well-organized but humourless. On the other hand there were the unschoolers, who were uninterested in teaching their children any lessons. They felt no pressure to keep up with the schooled children; they basically dropped out of main-stream schooling completely. Lara was neither of these, neither the disciplined Christian nor the laissez-faire unschooler. She tried to combine intrinsic interests with schooling at home, to have her girls able to work their numbers and write a story. If you were to visit her house after three or four years of this regimen, you would be impressed with the quality of the work. You would see on display a poem, a comic, or a work of art, and get the impression that Lara knew how to draw out the girls’ creativity, to lead them to express themselves with art, humour, and intelligence.

**After Grade 6.** Whenever Lara took her children to the pediatrician and talked about her homeschooling, the doctor would express dismay. The doctor would ask, “How will they ever get work in the real world without going to school?” Well Marion and Lara had a laugh at her expense when Marion’s art teacher hired her to do all of the illustrations for a picture book that she was publishing. By Grade 7 Marion was a published illustrator.

When Marion turned 13 and would normally be in a Grade 8 class, Lara enrolled her in Grade 9 secondary school courses at Riverside Academy at a cost of $1000 per course. Marion polished off all eight of her Grade 9 credits, thus skipping a year. Getting her through mathematics was an ordeal for her teachers, but she excelled in all other subjects.

During these years much of the homeschooling involved going to the country. Lara’s parents had a place near Bancroft with a wood lot and acres to roam and play. The children did their science lessons by observing frogs in a pond, the work of the farmer nearby, and so on. That area of Ontario had its share of ex-hippies who had set up their communes and
homeschooled their children. Lara and her children spent much time with these families and became involved in their activities. Horseback riding continued.

Later, when Caroline turned 11, Lara considered placing her in a notable alternative school, but the place repulsed Lara with its overly casual teacher with his hair down to his shoulders. The parents seemed to have too much time on their hands, which they used to meddle with the work of the school. As at LAS, they seemed to find controversy in the most trivial matters, so homeschooling continued.

The hard years. During this period Lara suffered some loss. Her father died of throat cancer and her mother developed Alzheimer’s. Lara travelled to Bancroft repeatedly to take care of her mother. During this period stresses developed in the marriage. Richard became quite hostile to Lara. The children took his side, perhaps because she spent so much time at the farm tending to her mother. The separation took perhaps 8 or 10 months to finalize, with much verbal abuse from Richard. The children seemed to want to push her out, presumably so that they could see the end of the war and have the peace of living with only one parent. Lara felt rejected as her children chose to spend more time with their father. One day, however, Caroline said to her, “We know daddy, grandma, and grandpa are treating you badly, and that’s wrong.”

Lara’s lawyer worried that Richard would win sole custody because of her absences from the home. Mediation dragged on and Richard vetoed every compromise that came to the table. Finally they let go of the mediator and Lara’s lawyer dealt directly with Richard’s. The two came up with a solution where Richard would buy Lara’s share of the house and she would move out, which she did.

Because their marriage had been common-law, the settlement gave Lara no spousal support. She received only compensation for her share of the house. Therefore she had to immediately turn her attention from homeschooling to resuming her career as an optician. After more than 10 years of absence from the profession, her college required her to retake her exams. Fortunately, she passed. A friend in the film industry gave her work taking care of the contact lenses that actors need for different roles, a glamorous and lucrative position. Work, however, was inconsistent, and could include double or triple shifts, which bothered the children. She therefore found more steady work at an optical store.

The separation agreement stipulated shared custody but the children felt more secure living in the family house with their father. During this period I helped her find an inexpensive yet lovely 3-bedroom apartment close to the lake. Lara spent a great deal of time and money furnishing and decorating the apartment for the children. Although Richard, with the help of his
parents, was best positioned to care for the children most of the time, Lara now had a place that they could come some days a week.

Of course, homeschooling had to end with both parents working. Marion went to the local technical collegiate for Grade 10, but quit school after that and went to work. By 17, she had her own apartment. At the time of this writing, all three children were in school: Calvin in a Grade 7 class for the autistic, Caroline in a Grade 9 alternative school (which had no programming for her learning disability), and Marion doing very well taking secondary school credits part-time at an adult high school. Lara continued her work as an optician, and pursued her BA by taking distance courses from Athabasca University.

Reflections

**The Grade 2 emergency.** In the summer after her Grade 2 schooling troubles, Lara learned that the traditional academic skills can be bought if your parents can afford the tutors and the time to teach you themselves. By Grade 3 she had figured out what the teachers wanted from her and how to please them. “I started negotiating school in the summer of Grade 2,” Lara said. She began to see school as a political activity. She saw the contradiction of the two philosophies of education, the traditional and the progressive. She remembered thinking at that time, “School is fake.” And she resolved at that time to “show them how it should be done.”

**Two schooling philosophies.** In Ontario, at that time, schools could be at completely different ends of the traditional-progressive continuum. In a progressive school, students learned through a discovery process. They learned English composition by writing a story, or mathematics by solving a problem using concrete materials. In a traditional school, the teacher emphasized skills such as memorizing the times tables and learning spelling as a separate subject. If a child happened to move from a progressive school to a traditional school (or vice versa), the student’s achievement level could move from the top of the class to the bottom, regardless of the child’s ability and output.

**Peers.** Hamilton Central taught Lara that school involved much more than simply mastering the syllabus. The students needed to also navigate the socio-political school landscape that involved the peers. Those lessons were more important to Lara’s mental health than academics. Without learning them, the rest of the lessons could easily be negated by the stresses of bullying and isolation. Her tactics in Grades 4, 5, and 6 showed that one could be smart both in the academic and in the social spheres.

**Problems with gifted programs.** When the Board designated young Lara gifted, the placement in effect exiled her from her neighbourhood school and all her friends. The
designation sent her away to join a group of peers whom she found snobbish and rude. As with Mario’s daughter, Ella, she found that many of the students in that building who were not in the gifted program made clear their hostility to the gifted interlopers. Paul’s family also had concerns about the rough school where he would have to go to receive a gifted program. These difficulties led to Lara skipping school every day, Ella quitting the gifted program, and Paul’s family declining the placement.

**Self teaching.** The gifted program was a poor fit for Lara, and she took matters into her own hands. Somehow she quit attending, without detection by the system or her parents, for Grade 7. One might be concerned about her receiving satisfactory instruction during this period. However, she discovered that greater learning may be possible by exploring her father’s magnificent home library. While her formal education may have suffered, her informal education empowered her. Not only was her syllabus excellent, but the entire experience was transformative. She learned that one can operate outside the system. No doubt that gave her the strength and courage to be a school negotiator for her own children in later life.

**Private Catholic secondary schools.** The progressive, dedicated, feminist nuns of Lara’s private Catholic school resembled the well-educated, deep, and committed priests of my own private Catholic school. For both religious orders, teaching was their vocation, their life. They resided on the campus. These situations provided Lara and I with a safe, focused, serious school community. Both Lara and I transferred to collegiates for Grade 13 and found them lacking when compared to these Catholic schools.

**Parent models.** Lara had two mother figures: her mother, Mary Anne, and her nanny, “Ma.” Mary Anne exemplified the mother with a career. Ma represented the mother as home maker and child caregiver. Up until her separation, Lara could act like Ma, being a warm, attentive caregiver, while her partner acted as the sole provider.

Her father, George, on the other hand, was her advocate, courageously confronting the school system on her behalf. When things went wrong for Lara in Grade 2 he immediately went to her defence. Lara’s father was a social activist. He demonstrated scepticism about the direction that the establishment generally takes society. Having such a role model gave her the courage to veer off the usual schooling highway.

**Helping the child with school.** Although intelligent and learned, Lara’s father Ted quit school at age 15. As a parent teaching a child how to succeed at school, Ted had a disadvantage: he liked to learn independently, not through institutional schooling. But he adapted and helped her by making a formal complaint, teaching her traditional skills himself, and by hiring her a
tutor. That home school he created for one summer resulted in Lara’s great school success for the next four years. Ted was not so successful at understanding her troubles with the gifted program and helping her adapt to that, nor was he that attentive in detecting her truancy for an entire year. However when she began skipping school in Grade 9 he and Mary Ann were quick to find her a placement at the private Catholic secondary school.

**The pros and cons of private lessons.** Buying private school in small packages tailored to fit her daughters’ interests was expensive, but suited Lara’s family well. Although I admired this privileging of the child’s passions, I noted that, at age 16, while most of her peers were in Grade 11, Marion refused to attend school. Perhaps Lara imparted a subliminal message, that school was unimportant. During Marion’s brief stay at St. Demetrius Lara would not hesitate to take her out of class for her private lessons.

**Strategies of homeschooling.** Lara demonstrates three different types of homeschooling. When she worked so hard at keeping up with the Ministry’s common curriculum she schooled at home. When she allowed the children free play to act out stories, play with dolls, or make artwork, she was an unschooler. And finally, when she put Marion into Grade 5 for May and June, and Grade 6 for September and October, she shared time between homeschooling and institutional schooling.

**Marital breakdown and homeschooling.** Marital breakdown can be catastrophic. During the often acrimonious breaking up period when the parents are still in the same house, the child has no school to go to for an escape from the conflict. (For Lara’s children, that took eight months.) When the terms of the separation were settled, she had to immediately find work. The homeschooling project had to end. The parents needed to find school immediately. Lara’s two youngest needed special education, but such a placement required institutional procedures that take time. The children suffered a double loss: the dissolution of their parents’ marriage and the closing of their home school.
Robert: The Man Who Held his Little Boy at Circle Time

Introduction

Robert realized that his rock music career was ending. He and his wife Susan decided he should stay at home with the children while she earned the money at her family furniture store. As the primary caregiver, Robert showed qualities that are often described as maternal: he was engaged, sensitive, and enjoyed the company of his daughter Julia, and his son, Jeffrey. While many parent volunteers in the JK/SK class would linger at the back of the room talking amongst themselves during circle time, Robert would join the circle and have his little boy curl up in his lap.

Connection

When Liam enrolled in SK at Lakeshore Alternative School, he became friends with Jeffrey, who was in JK. I became friends with his father, Robert. When we homeschooled Liam for Grade 1 Robert, Susan, and two other families who had children in SK, stood by us through the homeschooling year. When we finished our academics in the morning our friends would join us in the afternoon when their kindergarten was over. Since that time Jeffrey and Liam have taken different paths, but Robert and I have continued to meet every so often to discuss marriage, parenting, and life in general.

Background

Family life. Robert came from a family of nine children, with six sisters and two brothers. His father had a government job, and loved to read. He was always somewhat distant, especially to the boys, a fact that grew worse later in Robert’s life. The father paid for the girls’ post-secondary schooling, but the boys were expected to go straight to the workforce or earn money to pay for their own education. His mother mostly took charge of the house and raising the children, but sometimes worked part time. She was and still is a devout Catholic, a fact that sometimes irks Robert. Her devotion made Catholic elementary schooling a foregone conclusion for her children.

Siblings. The children all went to local Catholic schools, and the family was well known to the teachers. His older brother James, like Robert, went on to make a living in music. All of the six sisters went on to university but James and Robert did not. Robert was not a successful student, but his parents had no time for metaschooling. They simply threw their children into the pool of schooling and expected them to swim. Robert’s younger brother Billy died in a car crash at the age of 21, a trauma for the family and one that Robert’s father never fully overcame. Somehow Billy’s death widened the rift between the father and the remaining two sons.
**Robert’s schooling.** Robert described his primary school, St. Michael, as “a terrible place without music or sports.” In this school, corporal punishment (the strap) was very much still in practice. The fact that St. Michael still used the strap in 1969, when Robert was in Grade 8, showed that the school was behind the times, behind the reforms of the late sixties. St. Michael was an old-time, traditional, authoritarian Catholic school, more similar to the elementary Catholic school I attended in 1953 to 1960 than the progressive, Hall-Dennis schools I saw as a supply teacher in 1968 and 1969. Perhaps because of his experience with this unpleasant school, Robert disengaged from school; he neither excelled nor failed.

He continued his secondary schooling at Westmount Collegiate, which he described as “just another collegiate.” He had neither favourite teachers nor favourite subjects. Robert attended secondary school up until Grade 12, but not Grade 13. He talked about being a dropout and how that made him feel. Robert described that image of school failure as “a very painful thing” that still hurts today whenever he thinks about it. He and I talked about Ivan Illich’s and John Holt’s idea of school making people feel like failures when in fact it is the institution of school that has failed them. Robert’s distaste for public, traditional school made him more receptive to alternative schooling when he eventually had children of his own.

**Susan’s schooling.** Susan’s own schooling was a major factor in her and Robert’s decision to pursue alternative schooling for their children. As a child, Susan hated school and had a terrible attendance record. Her attitude changed completely when she transferred to SED (Shared Experience and Discovery), a public alternative secondary school. The teachers there were very progressive, hard working, and highly educated. The classes were small with as few as 10 students per teacher. The assignments were more engaging and the teachers challenged the students to write about topics that had meaning for them.

Susan flourished and became very passionate about her learning. She transformed from a truant to an A student. By Grade 12 the program at SED changed her attitude towards academics to such an extent that now she wanted to go to university. She decided that she would achieve higher scores for university admission if she returned to a regular collegiate for Grade 13. Due to SED’s educational philosophy, with its emphasis on independence, students left the school with great initiative and resourcefulness. When they returned to regular school they had an advantage. They joined students who needed teachers to constantly remind them of due dates, formats, and standards. The SED teachers had taught Susan to be more mature and independent than that.
Susan went on to earn an honours BA at York University. She majored in English, with a special interest in creative writing, and wrote a novel, which was published. Thus it was Susan’s positive alternative school experience that fuelled the family’s participation in alternative schools. Catholic elementary school had dissuaded Robert from the traditional school so that he was open to her plan.

**Career.** After leaving school, Robert took various odd jobs for two to three years. Some of these led to great stories, such as delivering kegs of beer to the different taverns of Toronto and sitting down for free beer en route. By age 22, Robert had become very committed to his music. He formed a band, which played various venues, and toured Canada. Robert told me many hilarious and painful stories of his life on the road. One story had the band driving a VW minivan through the Rockies. The driver, who never stopped talking and paid little attention to the road, hit an elk and ruined the van. Robert said that he was relieved when he gave up the road and finally parted ways with the guys in the band. He considered most of his band mates to be fools. He said that he “regretted putting so much of his life into rock and roll” and, of all the musicians he met, he only keeps in contact with one (aside from his brother). He saw life on the road as gross, with its stoned, drunk, and boring companions. He critiqued the lifestyle without sentimentality and concluded that it was dull and silly despite its reputation for being wild, exciting, and romantic. At the time of my last interview, Robert had managed a guitar shop for 10 years. He greatly appreciated a regular pay cheque and a predictable day’s work.

**Marriage and children.** Robert met his wife Susan at one of the bars where he played. Robert said that she initiated the relationship, and that he felt called to it. We discussed the research that suggests that the females select their males. Robert felt selected.

Robert married at age 30. They had their first child, Julia, when Robert was 37, and had their second child, Jeffrey, when he was 41.

**Jeffrey’s health.** It should be mentioned that Jeffrey was born with a life-threatening handicap. However the doctors at The Hospital for Sick Children invented a procedure that allowed him to live a relatively normal life. However, afterwards it was necessary for his parents to administer a lengthy homecare treatment once every day.

**Negotiating School**

**Parenting roles.** Robert was the stay-at-home, caregiving parent, and later he found it hard to leave the children to return to the work force. I recalled a fond memory of Robert at the alternative school kindergarten room. At the end of the period the class would have circle time with reading or singing. When Susan was there she would encourage Jeffrey to join in on his
own. She strongly believed in independence for her children. When Robert was there, he would sit down in the circle with crossed legs. Jeffrey would crawl up into Robert’s lap, and Robert would put his arms around his little boy, making him feel warm and cozy.

**LAS.** At the Lakeshore Alternative School, Susan took on a leadership role; she became the class representative, the treasurer of the school, and a member of the executive council. When Robert first came to the school he loved being involved, staying with his daughter, and bringing his younger son to his daughter’s class. He appreciated the principle of parental participation. He found at LAS a soft threshold between school and home. When one passed from the home to the school it was just like passing into another room of one’s house; school was not a foreign country. The gathering of parents in the class resembled a parent seminar where parents traded information about parenting. Sometimes, they would simply gossip and not get involved in helping the teacher, but at least they had that opportunity and the parent networking was valuable. The fact that the 2- and 3-year-olds could join the class with their parents and school-age siblings was a great incentive. The gathering of parents led to long-lasting friendships between families.

For Robert, parent involvement was essential, as was the mingling of children of different age levels. It seemed like the school was a big happy family with just three classes: junior and senior kindergarten, Grades 1, 2, 3, and Grades 4, 5, 6. When the parents provided snacks in the middle of the morning, the three classes would all meet. This mixture of grade levels was important to Robert. The 4-year-olds would mix with 11-year-olds, sisters would be with brothers, and so on. Many different events helped to build community, such as the Christmas party, the winter camp, and the summer camp. The parents, teachers, and principal held many meetings at the classroom and school level. These meetings were far more intense, democratic, and expressive of parental goals than your traditional school council. In Robert’s view, the government policy that all schools should have an enrolment of at least 100, was destructive. This led to four teachers and four classes: kindergarten, Grades 1/2, Grades 3/4, and Grades 5/6. The mingling at snack time with 30 more students no longer seemed feasible and ceased.

Even before the change in enrolment, Robert had concerns about the school. LAS was located in one section of a larger traditional school, King’s Public School. One principal administered both schools, which could be problematic. The traditional school demanded more of her time being more populous. Having another set of parents as a comparison helped her view the alternative school parents as more troublesome. Robert was also irritated by the attitude of
many of the LAS parents. Because some of them were artists, writers, and actors, these “hippies,” as Robert called them, regarded themselves as superior. They saw alternative schooling as special or precious, as if belonging to this school made them more hip than the parents of the other students in the rest of the building.

In fact Robert found flaws in many aspects of the school. He reported that after Julia left JK/SK, every year was rife with conflict and controversy. A few children would disrupt a class. They would yell, throw tantrums, hit or bite other children, and refuse to do their work. These particular children would monopolize the teacher’s attention and make the classroom an unpleasant place. Robert and I concluded that these children’s parents were “in flight from special education.”

Aggressive parents also caused much damage to the school’s social fabric. Conflicts between parents and teachers disrupted classes. Out of control parents would verbally attack teachers in front of the children. The Grade 3/4 teacher, a particularly vulnerable person, suffered greatly. The principal had to rescue her by transferring her to the regular school section of the building where she was able to teach while protected by traditional rules and boundaries. Also, the principal would often attend meetings between teachers and difficult parents and helped quell emotion. The atmosphere sometimes became like that of a family where the parents clash constantly. Robert and other friends that stayed at the school for several years called these parents “the crazies.” In fact Julia suffered from anxiety and her parents sent her to a psychiatrist.

Robert, despite being a parent in a community school, rarely spoke up. He noticed that the “crazy parents” constantly interfered, berated teachers, and behaved badly. He understood their concerns; however, he held his tongue because he saw that other parents’ involvement had made matters worse. He also felt sorry for the teachers.

**Moving house.** When I met them, the family rented a fair-sized house with a long back yard that was close to LAS. Unfortunately, the landlord sold the house and they were forced to move. Next they moved to a house on Lakeshore owned by the bank. We liked having them there because they were just three blocks from us. Living there gave them hope that they might actually purchase the place. But the house, despite the fact that it was in foreclosure, was too expensive. They began to entertain ideas of buying a townhouse in the east of Port Credit where the prices were lower. Meanwhile the business that Susan owned with her mother and sister started losing money. The business consisted of two stores and they had to close one. They
hoped to recover by focusing their energies on the more successful store. But that too was not making a great profit.

**Difficulties.** Within a year Susan suggested that Robert should look for work. It became clear that the dream of owning a townhouse was unrealistic and even the Lakeshore rental was too steep. Therefore the whole family moved to Susan’s family home, a large house built in the 1920s. That housed Susan’s mother, sister, niece, and her sister’s common-law partner who would soon be asked to leave. Added to that mix came four more family members who had to make do with living in the unfinished basement. Julia very much enjoyed living with her older cousin, Marlene, who was in Grade 8 and was becoming somewhat wild and had many stories to tell.

Not achieving their dreams and living with the shared accommodation began to take its toll on the marriage. For years Robert and Susan had gone to marriage counselling. Robert said to me that the counselling did not work. Robert felt that during the counselling he was going up against two women instead of one. (The female counsellor, originally Susan’s therapist, seemed to back Susan’s version of events.)

Just as Susan’s sister had asked her partner to leave, Susan asked Robert to leave when Jeffrey was 7 and Julia 10. Robert never understood why this was necessary but went along with it. He moved to a one-bedroom basement apartment on Lakeshore a couple of blocks away. I suggested to Jeffrey that he think of it as living in a big house, as big as two blocks, and that his father had simply moved to a different room. However, that did not console Jeffrey, who found the separation devastating. Julia, on the other hand, was furious. She refused to see or speak to her father.

During the separation Robert found work in sales at a high-end guitar shop. After a couple of years Susan asked him to return. When he returned to the marriage, it was with a new, stronger stance. Since Susan’s last family store had also gone bankrupt, he was the “economic powerhouse” in the relationship. The children were delighted to have the family back together.

**Julia.** When Julia left Grade 6 to attend the local Grade 7/8 middle school, she thrived. As Robert described her feelings, “She never wanted to see those LAS kids again.” Eight years in a class with the same 15 students, several of whom were disruptive and aggressive, made her claustrophobic. When she moved on to a larger social situation the quiet, shy, anxious girl stepped aside to allow her other side to emerge. Julia became social, gregarious, and popular. Her name became known not just in her own school, Green Street, but also the next 7/8 school, Bridgemount. As one of the neighbourhood children told Robert, “Everyone knows Julia.”
For secondary school, Julia first went to the nearby collegiate, Mountbatten, which she did not mind. I used to see her work as a cashier at the local Foodland. Robert said, “She needs makeup and trendy clothes and she knows we’re not competent enough to provide these things.” When I talked to her about school, she sounded unsure of her academic prowess. Nevertheless, she had a solid B average. But after Grade 11 she transferred to a downtown alternative school which she found fantastic, and her Grade 12 marks became excellent. We who knew her felt confident that she would gain entrance into whatever postsecondary institution she needed to achieve her goals. I could imagine her running a human resources department in a large company. As Robert said, “Julia has plans and we’re not included in them.”

Jeffrey. Robert always gave credit to LAS for the deep friendships Jeffrey built with his friends Aaron and Olivia. Robert was close with Aaron and Olivia’s parents as well. No doubt Robert would have cited Liam in that circle, but shortly after enrolling at St. Demetrius full-time Liam’s associations with the LAS students withered away. He switched his allegiance to the students of St. Demetrius. My bond with four or five parents that I met at LAS continued afterwards, but Liam moved on.

When it was time for Jeffrey to move to the local grade 7/8 school, a small crisis occurred. His parents had moved to an apartment on the west side of Baldwin Street, while Aaron and Olivia’s family lived on the east side. Jeffrey now lived about 50 metres outside the catchment of Green Street and could no longer attend with Aaron and Olivia. Instead, he had to go to Bridgemount even though their new home was closer to Green Street. It is possible to be closer to one school and still be in the catchment area of another.

Although Robert lived only two blocks from a highly-ranked Catholic school, he never considered enrolling Jeffrey there. Robert’s disgust with his childhood Catholic grade school overwhelmed any other considerations. The fact that Catholic schools have changed since the early seventies never entered into his deliberations. And of course, Susan was a true believer in alternative schools, the likes of which the Catholic system did not have.

Julia had gone to Green Street. Other LAS students went there too. Poor Jeffrey had to go to a strange, lonely place. Bullies descended, suffering ensued. But Jeffrey held up until Julia intervened and used her powerful influence to drive off the bullies. New friends came along and he settled in. Jeffrey and Aaron were later reunited at secondary school.

Jeffrey no doubt acquired his love for music, bands, and guitar from watching his dad play. Robert sent Jeffrey out for guitar lessons rather than teaching him himself. That skill that Jeffrey acquired from private lessons led to his passing the audition to an arts secondary school.
Epilogue. Meanwhile, Robert’s and Susan’s patched up marriage came undone again. Robert, this time, moved to an apartment in their building four floors down. Julia chose to live with Robert while Jeffrey stayed with Susan. The parenting and school negotiating continued from different floors. Other moves took place. Julia went on to Ryerson to take media studies, while Jeffrey took upgrading courses at an adult high school in the hopes of applying to Ryerson for sports management.

Reflections

The decision making for alternative schools. Susan’s idea of sending her children to an alternative school stemmed from her happy experience at SED. This is what had worked for her in her own schooling.

Susan’s passion for the alternative (and loathing towards traditional) awakened Robert’s own disgust with public schooling, making him a willing backer of “something else.” In many marriages only one parent has the personal practical knowledge to pursue a radical school negotiation. The other might fear such an unconventional choice, fight it, or go along with it to keep peace in the family.

Active participation. Robert participated by attending kindergarten, and that is how he became the man who held his son at circle time. Often in LAS, parents simply attended the classroom, socializing with other parents, sometimes disturbing the lessons, but not necessarily helping the teacher. When Julia attended JK and SK, Robert brought Jeffrey. Getting involved helped the caregiving father find a happy social situation for his preschool son.

The social dynamic of an alternative school. After Grade 6, Julia welcomed the end of alternative school. As Robert explained, “She is a social being and living in a school of only 100 was claustrophobic.” Alternative schools usually comprise a section of the school within a larger regular school, but the LAS students and the regular students did not usually associate. When children are young they appreciate the low number of students, the emphasis on family involvement, and the building of a school community. As they grow older they seek a bigger world. If Julia had been in a regular school of some 600 students, with two classes for every grade, staff would have reshuffled the deck of students so that every year, as the Grade 5s pass to Grade 6, they would have some of the same old classmates, but new classmates as well. She likely would have found the social dynamic a better match for her personality.

In flight from special education. Several of the students in LAS were undiagnosed, untreated, often emotionally disturbed special needs students. These children would disrupt the class hijacking the teacher’s attention and make learning difficult for everyone. Their parents
would not accept their conditions. They instead felt that the Board’s professionals were trying to label, segregate, and stigmatize their children. In their view, their dear children were unique and misunderstood; they did not have special needs. They refused special education help. They refused, despite the many advantages they might have received, such as psychological reports and recommendations, programs, special education teachers, low pupil-teacher ratios, educational assistants, and special equipment.

If these parents had sent their children to regular school, their special needs would have been quickly recognized. The staff would have encouraged or pressured the parents to give permission for special education identification and programming. The LAS staff usually avoided referrals to special education because that would conflict with the spirit of alternative schooling.

**Handicaps.** Robert and Susan felt that the community school, LAS, with its small population and intense involvement between families outside the school as well as within would lead to greater acceptance and understanding of Jeffrey’s unpleasant handicap. That may or may not be true as they lacked experience in how a regular school would have dealt with a child with such a handicap. With Liam’s diabetes both at St. Demetrios and Ignatius Loyola the staff and students were responsible and helpful with his illness and treatment. They understood his need to maintain his blood sugar and also respected his necessary absences. Susan and Robert could not know if alternative schools handle disabilities better than traditional schools.

**Sometimes doing nothing works.** When the school boundaries locked Jeffrey out of his preferred Grade 7/8 school I offered to help. I explained to Robert that school negotiators are guerrilla warriors, skilled at overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. Mario did it for Ella. Lara did it for Marion. “It” meant setting up an address in the catchment area of the desired school. For example, Robert could report to the Board that he was now a tenant of Karen and Brice, Aaron’s parents. Robert, however, declined, perhaps from a disdain for conflict, activism, or deceit. And his decision showed the limits of school negotiating. Sometimes doing nothing works. Jeffrey made new friends and eventually reunited with Aaron at the arts school later on. The separation tested their friendship but they kept up when school was out.

**Centralization of curriculum and alternative schools.** Alternative schools are, in fact, creatures of school boards. In Ontario, they opened in the mid-1970s to accommodate parents who were looking to leave the public school system in the search for freer, more holistic, more humane schools. The Board had the power to allow alternative schools some variance from the subject matter of the school board’s core curriculum. In 1996, the province centralized the curriculum, taking control from the boards of education. Many teachers in alternative schools
were able to continue despite contravening policy. Nevertheless they felt pressure to focus on numeracy, literacy and EQAO testing. (The LAS community decided to boycott EQAO testing.) Philosophically, in a climate of centralized curriculum, alternative schools no longer made sense.

**Child-centred education.** The public seemed to think that the Hall-Dennis Report produced child-centred schooling uniformly throughout the late sixties and the seventies. The stories of the schooling of Robert, Jennifer, and Lara show that reform reached some schools but not others. A great many schools, perhaps most, remained as authoritarian, menacing, and disengaging as the Catholic elementary school I attended in the 1950s.

**Mixed-grade classes.** The original Lakeshore Alternative School, with its three grades in one class, had some of the characteristics of an ungraded school. Before the conservative government required more efficiency in the delivery of education (2000), the JK/SK class met for snacks with the Grades 1/2/3 and Grades 4/5/6 classes. This practise at LAS echoed the time before the invention of public compulsory schooling, which led to the separation of children into age and grade cohorts (Gatto, 2002).

**The parent community.** LAS, I contend, concerned itself with building a parent community first of all. Often at large events such as the Thanksgiving dinner or the winter camp the children were ignored and allowed to run amok while the parents socialized. The notion of striving for excellence at school was last on their list of priorities. Parents formed many rewarding alliances or social circles.

**Traditional rules and boundaries.** Many parents choose the public alternative schools to escape the rigidity of standard school. They seek a more fluid, informal, and free milieu. However, they face a caveat. As we know from LAS, the aggressive parents, “the crazies,” show us the danger of unchecked emotion and the importance of social conventions. Customs, such as reporting to the office when visiting the school, signing a visitor’s book, making an appointment with the teacher, and having the principal sometimes sit in on a parent-teacher meeting, are helpful in preventing parents from venting extreme emotion and aggression.
Jennifer: The Woman Who Took Risks

Introduction

Traditional schooling made Jennifer feel like a failure and discouraged her from pursuing her true interest, the study of psychology. To protect her children from a similar fate, she decided that she would found her own school. Her school would be a free school that focused on the children’s interests. She gambled that a self-taught parent-educator could collaborate with other parents, also disaffected by public education, and build a place of confident, self-directed learners. The school that she organized was taken over by unschoolers. The place became miseducative so her family left, and she moved her boys to another private school, one founded by someone else.

Connection

I met Jennifer at a homeschooling meeting, on the mats of a yoga studio with its candles, incense, and tinkling bells. Jennifer seemed the most sensible parent there. It happened that we lived two blocks from each other so our children became playmates. Jennifer and I had the same criticisms of homeschooling: finding your children any friends is difficult, and the events homeschoolers launch are less stimulating than traditional school field trips and artist in the school visits. Jennifer invited me to join her committee that was planning to start a free school.

Background

Family life. Jennifer was born in 1968, in Sarnia, Ontario, and she had three brothers, Luke, Matt, and Phil. Her grandfather had started a family business there, a furniture company. Jennifer’s father went to the University of Windsor to obtain a degree in economics. However, upon returning, instead of following what he wanted to do and becoming an accountant, he did what his father wanted and joined the family business. “I think it has turned out fine but it was one of those life-changing decisions. I don’t think it’s what he wanted to do but what he felt he had to do,” Jennifer noted. “He changed its specialty to office furniture. Now it is very successful, shipping furniture all over North America.”

“My dad was very involved in running a business, but he was also a very involved dad,” Jennifer said. “We lived about two blocks from the office and factory. He got off at 5:00 p.m. every day, and we would meet him when he was walking home. He was always there. He would wrestle with us as he now does with his grandchildren,” Jennifer said. “I think he really enjoys kids; he’s just not an affectionate person. He’s just lacking that. And also he has a mentality that he is always right or he has always thought of something first. So it’s hard to have a
conversation with him when he has that mindset. When you have a conversation with him, he is thinking of the next thing to say instead of listening to what you are saying.”

“But he would come home and play with us a lot and if he had to go into work on the weekends, he’d often take us there and we would play in the factory and have a good time,” she said. “We did a lot together: trips, camping, and we rented a cottage for a couple of weeks every summer for as long as I can remember. My grandparents rented a place in Florida so we would go down there for a week during March break. One summer we rented a houseboat and another summer we rented an RV for a week. We did different family things together. I think I got my feeling of family from my parents: the importance of family and the importance of eating together and really enjoying gathering around the table, talking about the day, laughing.”

Jennifer’s mother, Mary, was also university educated. Mary went to Windsor for her Bachelor of Arts and to McGill for her Masters of Library Science. But, like Jennifer’s father, she never worked in her preferred field. Instead she volunteered at the grade school and at the public library while being a “stay at home mom.” Jennifer’s mother suffered rheumatoid arthritis since she was 15. “It was pretty hectic,” Jennifer said of her mother’s difficulty managing her ailment and taking care of four kids, especially before they were of school age. “She had some help from an interesting woman named Lillian. And it was a great neighbourhood, lots of kids, a park down the street. We were always out doing something with somebody but when mom yelled, ‘Dinner,’ we all ran home.”

Jennifer noted that each generation of parents tries to do better than the one before: “Aren’t we trying to do better than our parents did? That is not to say that our parents didn’t do a good job.” Jennifer said that her family was quite close, despite some differences she had with her father. I asked her about the communications within her family today. “We talk on a regular basis,” Jennifer said. “In many respects we are a close family. We talk fairly regularly and in the summer we see them because we are up at their cottage, the family cottage. That’s totally my dad. He’s always finding things to bring the family together. It doesn’t always work because everybody has their issues with my dad. But he is always trying to make a central place where we can all be together. And that’s the best he can do. He’s making that effort.”

“My mom was the more sensitive of my parents,” Jennifer went on. “My parents aren’t very emotional. No, that is not the term . . . I mean physically loving. Physically loving as in you hug your child and cuddle. There was definitely something missing there. And again it was the way they were raised. I think that had a lot to do with how they were. Having four children
would be really hard because you really feel that you do not have your own space at all. But I think my mom to a certain extent was in line with my dad.”

Schooling. Jennifer attended a Catholic school, St. Elizabeth’s, from senior kindergarten to Grade 8. She disliked school. She felt bored and unhappy. On reflection, she thought the teachers were not very good. “Teachers set up my perception of school” she said, and they eventually influenced her perception of herself. Grade school turned her against public schooling and helped her decide never to put her children into such an institution.

Specifically, it was the work of the Grade 2 teacher, Mrs. Saunders. This woman Jennifer described as deranged. Jennifer remembered that she made some errors in subtraction while working at the blackboard. Next, “She held me by my ankles in front of the class and made a spectacle of me because of how I did the math.” The teacher’s madness was verified by Jennifer’s observations of her treatment of other children; for example, one boy might fart. Mrs. Saunders made a spectacle of him by spraying deodorant all around him. “She was actually just psychotic,” Jennifer summarized. “She was horrible.”

Jennifer liked her Grade 3 teacher Ms. Kern, but for some reason, Ms. Kern called her a “dumb bunny.” “I really liked my Grade 3 teacher, she was funny . . .” Jennifer said. “The dumb bunny situation stands out simply because it came from a teacher that I really liked. So that was kind of hurtful. That was a major relationship. But she was probably just saying it to be funny.”

This was a small Catholic school in the sense that there was one Grade 1 class, one Grade 2 class, and so on. Jennifer said that there was the odd combined grade class such as a 3/4 class, or a 4/5 class. The students who were slower in Grade 3 next year would be placed in the Grade 3/4 class with the same teacher. The brighter ones would be put in the 4/5 class.

In Grade 2, Jennifer had the sadistic teacher and in Grade 3 the teacher who labelled her a “dumb bunny.” I noted that the major hurt done to Jennifer by the school occurred before Grade 4. Jennifer agreed, and said that the principal changed after Grade 3 and the school culture improved. “When I first came to the school, the principal was a nun, and the strap was in place. The new principal came and the teachers improved. The teachers I had in Grade 2 and 3 were probably the worst.” Jennifer continued, “In Grade 4, the use of the strap diminished, and I liked the teacher. The biggest issue for me in grade school, however, was that I did not learn the way they needed me to learn and so I was made to feel stupid. My feelings about grade school and my self-confidence all stem from the fact that I did not learn the way many other people learn.” Jennifer’s report cards said that she was careless, and did not put enough effort into school.
I asked Jennifer if there were any other horror stories, perhaps ones that befell her brothers. She said that Luke and Matt got the strap often because they were older. Also, Luke got to skip a grade but the nun principal did not like him. She called him “Luke the Lip” and strapped him a few times. Jennifer said that Matt was introverted but would always do well in school. He did however have Mrs. Saunders as well and he reported that humiliation was standard thing for “anybody she could find to pick on.”

When Jennifer moved on to secondary school, her father was on the school council. Also called St. Elizabeth’s, the building was next door to the elementary school. “I didn’t feel I could be successful,” Jennifer said. “All of my feelings from grade school went into high school. Math was always poor. English was one of my better subjects. I was always a 70s type of person, I didn’t do well with the grades but I did manage to get into university.”

St. Elizabeth’s was an all girls secondary school. She had friends at school, she handed in her work, but she did not enjoy it as education. “I had already determined that I didn’t have the brains, and I was compensating by trying to be funny, by being the rebel,” Jennifer said. “I was extroverted. I made jokes, but they probably weren’t funny. I probably was not so much a rebel in grade school as in high school. I made new friends, and around Grade 11 started alcohol, partying, and things like that.”

I reminded Jennifer of our first meeting at the yoga studio, and told her of my first impression: I thought she was the most coherent and sensible of the group. I wondered how anyone could mistake her for “dumb.”

“Some people were extremely successful in the public system because they fit into that box,” Jennifer said. “If you are an outsider, they have to put you in another box. That helps them figure out who you are. It makes it easier for everybody. Also, my two older brothers were successful in grade school, but I was not and so people would think: here is a person who is not able to do what her brothers did. The report card said whatever and that’s what my parents began to think of me. The school said this and my parents believed it. And then I was set up for failure, the whole time. That’s the way it has been for a lot of my life.”

The interaction of home and schooling. Jennifer never mentioned to her family the traumas of Grade 2 and 3. She never told her parents that her Grade 2 teacher picked her up by her ankles. Would Jennifer’s parents have supported her? “I remember one time,” Jennifer said, “I was probably in Grade 6, and I was really frustrated. ‘It’s always work, work, work, all the time. There is never any fun,’ I said. And my dad just laughed at that comment. He thought it very funny that I should think that life could be any different. Why should I, an 11-year-old,
expect that life should be fun?” Of course, Jennifer’s father knew nothing of the many studies that show how well children learn through play.

Jennifer mentioned a time when her father was trying to help her with mathematics. “That was horrible, absolutely horrible. He would be impatient because I wasn’t learning in the way he was teaching. I wasn’t going fast enough or whatever. He would become angry. And I would always end up in tears. That was another of those grade school experiences that just added to the pain.” I asked Jennifer what happened to her feelings of frustration with her father when they went on camping trips. She said that they did not disappear. When I asked Jennifer if her father might have had problems with her because she was a girl, she said “I think my dad had a discomfort as I grew older. When I was younger it was not an issue but as I grew older it became more of an issue. It was awkward.”

Jennifer said that her relationship with her mother had always been closer. “She had a fall in May, broke her femur and has been confined to a wheelchair. She’s had health issues all the time that I have known her. All her joints hurt, she’s had joint replacements. Her hands are deformed and misshapen. But I’ve always known her that way. She’s self-conscious of the way she looks. I have directed a lot of my anger at my dad. Not actually, but in my head, for a lot of the things that have happened in my childhood. I have not directed it at my mom because of her health. It seemed unfair, I felt protective of her. As I turned into a teenager, we clashed. I see many relationships that people my age have with their parents, close relationships that I wish we had. On the other hand I don’t think it’s a bad relationship. It could be worse.”

**Adult life.** Jennifer graduated from university with a major in political science and options in psychology, sociology, and business. She loved psychology and wanted to pursue graduate studies, but doubted her own abilities. When she came home, she too was asked by her father to join the family business. Like her father before her, she set aside her true interest and complied. She then moved to Toronto to work at a furniture retailer associated with her father’s company. “I was very successful in sales,” Jennifer told me. “But my father did not believe it until he heard from other people how successful I was. He then saw me in a whole new way.”

Jennifer met her husband, Mark, at university, where he was pursuing a degree in business. They both came from Sarnia, but did not know each other prior to university. Mark also moved to Toronto and he found work with a large pharmaceutical company. Jennifer and Mark married when Jennifer was 26 and her son Sean was born soon after. Nine months later Mark’s company moved the family to the States for three and a half years. First they moved to North Connecticut, and then to New York State. Nick was born there.
Jennifer’s grown-up brothers also have ambivalence about their schooling. Phil’s children go to a Montessori school; his wife is a teacher there. “Matt doesn’t have any children, but Luke has three and the oldest go to French immersion,” Jennifer said of her brothers. “We all went to university. Matt and I are the only ones who got our degrees. Luke and Matt went to Bishops, while Phil went to Western.” I asked Jennifer why two of the brothers did not complete their degrees. “Luke went travelling,” she said. “I think the thing for all of us was that university was something we had to do, not something we wanted to do. And I think that was a mistake.”

**Negotiating School**

**Argument against homeschooling.** Based on her early experiences with school, Jennifer wanted to spare her children from having to go through what she did. She therefore decided to set up her own school. While making plans for her school, Jennifer kept her boys out of public school, and instead homeschooled them. For Jennifer, homeschooling was simply a practical necessity. She did not believe in it. In fact, she believed that children need space and separation from their parents. However, during this time she provided many stimulating learning packages in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. These commercial packages, usually playful and entertaining, were comprised of DVDs, computer programs, and educational games. These packages provided a structure similar to a kindergarten environment, and also could be viewed as both schooling at home and unschooling.

**Catholic schools.** Jennifer, a baptized Catholic, went to traditional Catholic schools from kindergarten to Grade 13. However, she sought for her boys a school where they could have some free choice about what they learned (Greenberg, 1995; Miller, R., 2002). For her, Catholic schools were no different than public schools. Neither offered free choice in subjects and so she rejected them both.

**Montessori schooling.** With Jennifer’s school one year away from opening, Sean spent his senior kindergarten year in the local Montessori School. Again, this was simply a convenience, a place for Sean to meet other children. Jennifer found Montessori too structured, too other-directed, the opposite of what she hoped to achieve in her own free school. She wanted her children to have the space and time to discover their own true interests without external and distracting activities. Greenberg’s Sudbury Valley School paralleled Jennifer’s beliefs exactly.

**Sudbury Valley schooling.** When she lived in the United States, Jennifer joined a website for mothers at home. Her email friend, Shelly, happened to be launching a school based on the Sudbury Valley School model (founded in Framingham, Massachusetts, 1968). That school, Annapolis Valley, inspired Jennifer’s school. “The philosophy of the school spoke to
what I believed in,” Jennifer said. Another email friend, Kerri, had lived in Vancouver, BC. She had sent her children to Victoria House, a variation of the Sudbury School model. Kerri introduced Jennifer to Caitlin, a young teacher who had worked for three years in a traditional academic private school. Caitlin preferred the free school philosophy so she joined up with Jennifer and Mark, becoming one of the four original founders of the South Etobicoke Free School. (I was the fourth.)

Founding the school took place between September 2001 and September 2003 and consisted of setting up the founders group, recruiting new members, purchasing a library of books from the original Sudbury Valley School, studying and discussing the philosophy of SVS, sending out announcements, holding public meetings, and finding an appropriate site for the school. The founders group dissolved after founding, to be succeeded by the advisory board, the assembly, and the school meeting, all of which were laid out in the Sudbury Valley School literature. The advisory board involved students, teachers, and members of the public. The assembly included the parents, teachers, and students. And the school meeting consisted of staff and students, not parents. In 2003 the school set up with 15 students aged 4 to 17 in a mothballed Catholic school, St. Alphonsus. Jennifer’s children attended the school for three years from 2003 to 2006 but ultimately Jennifer and Mark decided to withdraw Sean and Nick.

Jennifer and I discussed the problems that led to her leaving the very school that she originated. The first problem concerned school administration: questions such as who is in charge of funding, rent, and advertising. For the first three years the assembly, which included parents with business knowledge, managed these matters. The SVS philosophy, however, stated that the school meeting of staff and students should take on these responsibilities. The philosophy stressed teaching the children accountability, self-reliance, and practical problem solving: for example, if several students wanted to start a publishing house, their first challenge would be to raise the funds to acquire a photocopier. The SVS philosophy gave each child a vote on business matters equal to each of the adult teachers. Jennifer and Mark subscribed to the SVS theory of equality but in practice they wanted to see professional, experienced, adults take part in business matters, especially marketing. By 2006, staff and students were asking for the handover of all controls including these business operations.

The second problem involved a decision to lower tuition. The assembly voted to lower yearly tuition from $8000 to $5000 to attract more enrolment, and to give existing families a price cut. Mark and Jennifer considered a cut of 37.5% unsustainable when measured against the cost of renting a building and running a school, but they also thought it worked against
increasing enrolment. They argued that people do not respect something that is offered too cheaply.

The third issue concerned enrolment. Over the three years before Jennifer and her family left, the numbers decreased from 15 to 11. In the last year, 4 of the 11 students were teenage boys. In the year Jennifer’s family left, the school’s population decreased to only eight students. In contrast, Shelly’s Annapolis Valley School started with 60 and rose to 100, and the original Sudbury Valley School opened in 1968 with 100, and had over 200 in 2001. Due to low numbers, students lacked a peer group of their own. No one was Sean’s or Nick’s age.

Jennifer’s and Mark’s fourth complaint concerned staffing. The pupil-teacher ratio seemed ridiculously low. This tiny school had two teachers: Caitlin, and a parent who worked in lieu of tuition. A staffing plan proposed for the fourth year added another parent working for tuition. A pupil-teacher ratio of 8 to 2 would become 8 to 2.5 (.5 because Caitlin would now work half time) and the institution would lose another $5000. As a business plan, this staffing model seemed to Jennifer irresponsible. In addition, Jennifer thought the staff lacked what she termed a “code of professionalism:” they showed poor communication with parents, failed to model adult behaviour, offered too few constraints to children, and taught very little. The overall tone was that of a parent cooperative, not an educational milieu.

Poor student behaviour added to Jennifer’s list of complaints. The four teenage boys were loud and rude. They used coarse language while in contact with the young children. Jennifer found their grossness negatively influenced Sean. She did favour self-expression, but believed that the adults had the responsibility to separate the older children from the younger ones. The staff seemed completely ignorant of A. S. Neill’s dictum, “freedom not license” (1960).

One 10-year-old student habitually hit other students. He was finally suspended from the school through the actions of the judicial council, another committee of staff and students, this one in charge of discipline, but the process took forever. Jennifer asked me how the public school system dealt with “hitting.” I explained that, at the time of the interview, a time of great concern about safety, a principal would take action immediately. If the student did not cease hitting forthwith, suspension would quickly follow.

The original Sudbury Valley School literature argued that freedom would lead to self-directed, authentic learning. By graduation each student would have completed a body of work based on their own interest and passion which each could defend very articulately. Greenberg, the founder of that first Sudbury Valley School, claimed that without secondary school
certification its students could gain entrance into prestigious institutions of higher learning by confidently presenting their work to an admissions officer. Jennifer’s South Etobicoke Free School never attempted such a portfolio for its students.

Later, Jennifer felt regretful for having wasted her children’s time and for placing them in such an environment.

**White Birches Elementary School.** After Jennifer withdrew her children from the South Etobicoke Free School, she enrolled them into a private, progressive school, White Birches Elementary School. Founded in 2003 by a lawyer named Mary Hamilton, the school’s three multi-graded classes consisted of JK/SK, Grades 1/2/3, and Grades 4/5/6. The school enrolment was approximately 50 with a pupil-teacher ratio of ten to one. At the time of this writing, plans were in the works for a Grade 7/8 class. The school also had teachers that specialized in music, physical education, and art. White Birches seemed to combine the traditional components of direct instruction, programs of study, and textbooks with the progressive components of small group work, talk, active learning, and moving around. In the summer before enrolling there, Jennifer worried that her children, Sean especially, were behind in reading, and so she used a home reading program during the summer with the hope that he would catch up. (That hope crashed when he was identified as dyslexic.)

In an early interview, Jennifer saw White Birches as a temporary place for her boys. She retained the hope that her South Etobicoke School would return to the original Framingham school’s values and policies. In a later interview, after a year at Birches, she seemed more cautious: “I would have to see evidence that things had changed.” And so White Birches became a satisfactory school for Jennifer’s boys. It was not as free as the SVS model but not as “rigid” as traditional public school. It was not, however, without its problems, for example both the music and the French teachers resigned abruptly and Mary had to replace them in a hurry. The replacements were out of step with the school’s philosophy: they were less playful, less empathetic. The boys asked to withdraw from French and the school principal was flexible. Jennifer could see herself one day having a talk with Mary Hamilton about their experiences establishing private schools, but decided to wait. She was so relieved to have her boys in a safe place away from the free school that she had founded. The boys then enjoyed school and so she overlooked most problems, including the cost of tuition for two boys ($16,000 per year each), a strain even for an upper middle-class family.

**Family life while negotiating school.** “For seven years, my dad constantly questioned what we were doing, and not in a positive, supportive way. He was trying to undermine us,”
Jennifer said of her father’s reaction to schooling alternatives. “When we were homeschooling, he would say: ‘How can you homeschool? You are not a teacher. You cannot homeschool.’ When we opened the South Etobicoke Free School, he would say, ‘If Sean isn’t reading by a certain age while his younger cousin is reading, Sean will feel stupid.’ It was an ongoing debate. He would never read any literature about the Sudbury model . . . He asked questions in a combative way,” she said. “He expected me to say ‘Oh thanks Dad, you’re right, I’d better do this differently.’ ” Jennifer felt that he was trying to wake her up, or make her realize that she did not get it.

“My mom was not as vocal, but actually since we have moved on to a different decision, her feelings have become more obvious. She is much more supportive of us now, going to an academic school that offers a set curriculum. They both feel that having self-discipline with things planned is really important. Now that we are making choices within traditional schooling the family is coming back together again.” Interestingly, after a year at White Birches, her dad has started making comments to the effect that much of traditional schooling is “a waste of time.”

In my last interview with Jennifer, she informed me that Nick continued to go to White Birches, which then went to Grade 8. Sean, however, was diagnosed with a learning disability, dyslexia. To address that problem she transferred him to an Arrowsmith School, which treated learning disabilities by doing exercises that purportedly directly affect the brain’s learning styles.

**Reflections**

**Family and self-image.** I questioned Jennifer about whether the image of dumbness did not start at home but Jennifer insisted that it originated at school. I mentioned how I taught my son Liam to look at school critically: “No matter what happens in school, it is just school,” I told him. We discussed school as an institution with its own bureaucratic flaws, which helped him take its mistakes less personally.

“The point you make with Liam is very important,” Jennifer said. “If you had supported the school, Liam would feel differently. But you are supporting him, so he understands that school means something, but it doesn’t mean everything.”

**Conformist parents.** Jennifer’s father reminded me of other participant’s parents who blindly trusted the school. Since their time a revolution in parenting has occurred. Jennifer and I wondered when their time ended and parents began thinking critically about how the schools treated their children. Was it 1975? 1983? Her parents were what I call fifties parents. “Fifties
parents living in the sixties,” Jennifer added. They were conformists really. Much literature was written in the fifties about conformity. Two that affected me deeply were Robert Lindner’s *Must You Conform?* (1956) and Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956).

**Self-direction.** Jennifer’s grandfather wanted her father to join the family business. And that is what he did, giving up his dream of becoming an accountant. Jennifer, too, joined the family business, which had nothing to do with her dream of becoming a psychologist. None of her brothers fulfilled any of their dreams through university education. They had to go elsewhere to find their path. Therefore, one could say that Jennifer tried to rectify her family history by giving her children a free school education, which the proponents claimed would grant them intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and self-direction (Greenberg, 1992). Jennifer and the free school movement believed that traditional schooling overwhelmed the child with topics irrelevant and meaningless to him. That kind of schooling robbed the child of his ability to develop and pursue his own interests, passions, and purposes in life.

**Labelling.** Perhaps having successful brothers helped the teachers’ label Jennifer as dumb. “I had two siblings ahead of me in the school, one of whom ended up skipping a grade, my first brother, who was very outgoing, very gregarious,” Jennifer said. “My second brother was introverted but did very well in school, and then there was me. When you have siblings ahead of you in the school, teachers develop expectations of children and what they can do. But I didn’t meet that expectation. My two brothers were successful in grade school, but I was not. The report card said whatever and that’s what my parents began to think of me.”

Labelling can haunt one for a lifetime. These insults take on a life of their own through the individual’s negative self-talk causing ongoing psychological harm through the passing years. Words have power and can linger within. The negative report cards led to further demoralization and recurring failure, in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Self-confidence and self-doubt.** I first met Jennifer at a meeting for homeschoolers. To me she seemed the most sensible of the group. I asked how anyone could have considered her “dumb.” Jennifer carried the school’s message that she was dumb back to the family, who believed it.

School weakened her confidence and sense of self. Jennifer’s whole schooling, including university, was mainly “going through the motions” or “doing not what I chose but what other people expected.” Jennifer needed a PhD to become a psychologist but lacked the belief in herself to pursue it. She feared that if she tried she would fail.
School reform. “Our school had some really lousy teachers at the time when my brothers and I were there,” Jennifer said. “When I was in Grade 4 there seemed to be a shift. Some really fine teachers arrived. Eventually they must have trickled out from Toronto.”

We discussed what I considered to be the great texts of school reform, such as the Hall-Dennis Report. Many believe that the child-centred philosophy undermined structure, discipline, and purpose. If one actually reads the report, one can see that it showed great respect for the child. When Jennifer asked what happened to that emphasis on student-centred learning, I referred to Ron Miller’s notion of the “conservative restoration” (2002). Child-centred ideas were packed away. Other critiques of society arising in the sixties, such as ecology and holistic medicine, have become widely accepted. But still we are ambivalent about progressive education.

Hitting in the schools. Jennifer seemed to approve of the strong actions of public schools when students hit others. I told her that, since the era of Ontario’s Safe Schools Act (2000), whenever a principal received a report of hitting, strong action was taken immediately. Two 11-year-olds rough-housing could be put on a behaviour contract. Boys pushing each other could be construed as violence. “No touching” became a common school playground rule. Teachers gained the authority to suspend students, which used to be the exclusive power of the principal alone. Jennifer’s free school was too lax, while society had become too tough. Neither the public school nor Jennifer’s free school found the middle way. Public schools took hitting by children as seriously as the police treat assault by adults. Jennifer seemed to approve of this lack of tolerance of any hitting.

I, however, felt, that within the public system, behaviour management became too rigid and punitive and far less understanding and forgiving than schools during the period when I taught. Before 2000, when a couple of boys were rough-housing, we teachers on yard duty would saunter over, disperse the crowd, pick them up, do some mediation, make them shake hands while telling them not to do it again, and send them to different ends of the yard. We teachers handled the situation without undue reporting, involving the principal, and creating a formal record. When the same child repeatedly engaged in combat at recess, we would eventually take him to the office, and define the problem as needing more intervention.

Comparing Sudbury Valley Schools. We can compare Jennifer’s Sudbury Valley School to her friend Shelly’s Annapolis Valley School. Shelly had a financial backer, a driving force, a dotcom millionaire who devoted himself to the school. Her school was located in a rural setting similar to the original Sudbury Valley School. Unlike at Jennifer’s urban setting, the
children could roam free safely and learn from observing nature. Shelly’s group also had some conflict among founders which delayed opening for a year but her school opened with 60 students from K through 12, as opposed to Jennifer’s which numbered 15 in year one and declined to 8 in year four. In summary, Annapolis had money, a rural setting, and more time to resolve conflict, which led to a viable number of students.

**The once and future school.** I told Jennifer about my concept of the “once and future school,” that mythical place. In negotiating school we try X, Y, and Z. But we always keep in mind this ideal place where we want our child to be. I asked Jennifer, “Given your experiences with the Sudbury Valley School Model, which took a turn you never intended, what is your once and future school?”

Jennifer described her ideal school as a place “where the child has a voice in the community at a young age.” She said that it would combine features of the original Sudbury Valley School and Summerhill. “The thing that I liked about Summerhill was the fact that classes happened. At Sudbury Valley School classes and activities were happening. A large enough population providing a lively environment where it feels like things are going on and people can choose to participate in what they want to participate in promotes a natural motivation to learn. That was lacking at the South Etobicoke Free School. There wasn’t a large enough population. There wasn’t enough activity.”

I suggested that Greenberg’s educational philosophy itself may have led the teachers to hold back on activities (1995). Greenberg believed that many students need to do nothing and to experience boredom for a while to force them to delve deeply into themselves, to discover their true interests or passions. He thought that other-directed activities can be a crutch that prevents the inner search for the true interest.

**Unschooling.** Jennifer’s experience with unschoolers was negative. In her story, unschoolers hijacked her Sudbury Valley school. Those unschooling families seemed to seek only a social situation for their children and had no appreciation for the educational ideals of the Sudbury Valley School philosophy. She felt the need to protect her sons from being exposed to the four teenage boys who used vulgar language laden with sexual innuendo. These boys had no regard for the effect of their actions on these innocent, younger children, and were really unschoolers who simply loitered at the school. The two teachers, one of whom was an unschooling parent, failed to check this uncivilized behaviour.

For Jennifer, unschooling was a destructive philosophy.
Advocating. I told Jennifer about how Jamie’s father confronted his French teacher who had humiliated his son. Being in business, he argued that the teacher’s students are like customers. She should try to please them. Without happy customers, the business will not succeed. His confrontation led to an apology.

“He did well,” Jennifer said. “There are situations in school that can be terribly humiliating.” Unlike Jennifer, the child felt confident enough to make his complaint. “It’s a good thing that that student was supported. Hopefully that humiliation will be erased. If you have your parent’s support, it’s the most important thing in the world.”  

Jennifer never complained to her parents because she sensed that they would not advocate for her. They would have denied any need for advocacy because, for them, the school was always right.

Arrowsmith School. Jennifer enrolled Sean in an Arrowsmith school. The program, developed by Barbara Arrowsmith-Young, uses methods that she believes helped alleviate her own learning disabilities. The scientific theory behind the program is “neuroplasticity,” the concept that the brain is malleable; when one pathway is damaged, others will develop to compensate. The Arrowsmith program claims that, using its exercises, any person can learn new thought and behaviour patterns.

The TCDSB included an Arrowsmith class funded by the Board. Interestingly, its special education department, in tandem with its research department, concluded that any traditional special education program that had the same pupil-teacher ratio as an Arrowsmith class would have equally good results teaching a learning disabled student. The Board therefore attempted to cancel its Arrowsmith class, but the parents involved were politically astute and took action. They successfully defended the program, preventing its closure.

Jennifer’s success. Although Jennifer was not able to successfully develop her own free school where students are encouraged to develop their own curriculum based upon their own drives, interests, and curiosity, she kept her children out of the traditional public school. In so doing, she succeeded in protecting her children from going through the extremely institutionalized version of school with its regimentation. She protected them from the harm to self esteem that she suffered.
Alexandra: The Mother who Negotiated Special Education

Introduction

Alexandra immigrated to Canada from Ireland when she was 18. She had two children with two fathers from two marriages that ended in divorce. Her first child, Justin, stayed with her first husband, Edward, during the week and with her on weekends. When Justin turned 18 he chose to return to his mother’s home to go to university. Alexandra’s younger son, Jameson, who we called Jamie, took his parents’ divorce very hard. He attended a treatment centre to address his social, emotional, and behavioural problems, and participated in family therapy with his parents.

This narrative concerns negotiating school for Jamie only, not Justin.

Connections

I met Alexandra at Jamie’s birthday party at a swimming pool in North York when he turned 7. As it turned out, I had taught her first son, Justin, when he was a student at Holy Spirit. Liam met Jamie at the end of Grade 1 and they were still close friends at the time of this writing. Alexandra, Jamie, and sometimes Jamie’s father Don, continued to stay with us at our family cottage often.

Background

Family life. Alexandra’s father, Brian, held a management position with the Irish public service. He also founded a voluntary organization called St. Michael’s, which led him to be nominated “Person of the Year” for Ireland two years in a row. Brian’s father died when he was five, so his mother went to work in a factory and he had no choice but to leave school at age 14 to go to work and help support the family. Leaving school early was a great misfortune as Brian was a bright student.

Although Alexandra’s mother, Kate, was nervous in school and not as successful as Brian, she was an avid reader. She went to school until age 16, worked, and then stayed home to raise a family, which was quite common for women in Ireland at that time.

Alexandra came from a family of six children. First was Alexandra. Two years later Rhonda arrived. After another two years Caitlin was born, and two years after that came Victor. The twins, Heather and Allison, arrived ten years later.

“Caitlin and Victor were always fighting,” said Alexandra. “For example, Caitlin would say ‘I’m bored, what should I do? Oh I know,’ and then she would say ‘Dad, Victor hit me.’ And Dad would then give Victor a good hiding, saying ‘I told you not to hit little girls.’ Victor
then would find Caitlin, and say ‘I’m going to give you something to cry about now.’ And so on. Endless fighting.”

Despite the fighting, Alexandra loved her siblings, especially Rhonda. They each had sets of rag dolls and bears, and would play and joke about the dolls getting hurt, and would take it quite seriously. Alexandra invented sets of stories called “People Like Us” where the characters were like her family, only with perfect lives, the best friends and the best clothes. At night the girls would get together in Alexandra’s bed to play dolls and Alexandra would tell stories which her sisters loved. Her reward was a nice warm bed: “It was cold in our house. I would tell them the story, but they would have to come in to my bed and warm it up.” The children would also make up games such as “Sale of the Century” where they would earn money answering trivial questions, and spend the money on imaginary objects, such as a four-post bed for their mother. “We had a good laugh.”

**Schooling.** “Before school I could read and write,” Alexandra said. Her mother begged the school to place her in kindergarten one year early but the class was full. “If I had been my mother then,” Alexandra said, “I would have taken my daughter to another school, but she didn’t have that initiative.”

When Alexandra did go to school, the family had just finished moving: “I was the new kid. I felt that these kids belonged, and I didn’t.” She arrived two days late and felt singled out. “It was a new area for me too, new houses, new neighbours.” The school was all girls. “We didn’t have a choice; that’s the way the school system was.”

In Grade 1 Alexandra was “bored to the core.” She would finish a princess book, and then ask for the next one, but the teacher had no more. She recalled chalking another girl’s clothes. The other girl reported her to the teacher, who sent Alexandra to her former kindergarten teacher with a note detailing her misbehaviour. The teacher intended to dramatize for Alexandra that she was not yet ready for Grade 1. This punishment backfired when Alexandra began to enjoy herself by joining in the art and activities of the class. Her Grade 1 teacher came some time later, saying, “So, are you ready to come back now?” “No,” said Alexandra. “I like it much better here and I think I’ll stay.” Alexandra explained, “I was punishing her for punishing me.” Despite these tensions, Alexandra got straight As, to the delight of her parents, who went around telling everybody.

She attended that first school until Grade 2, and then moved again halfway through the year. At the next school she wrote an A for the handwriting lesson, the teacher said, “This is not an A.” Alexandra said that she wrote it the way her mother taught her, but the teacher told
Alexandra to do it the teacher’s way. Alexandra did it again her own way, and the teacher banged her head against the desk. “What was I thinking? I was defending my mother. I thought she was right and the teacher was wrong.”

When Alexandra was nine she won an international art competition. She used the prize money to buy blackboards and chalk for her sisters, so she could teach them to draw. For another competition, one within her own school, her piece was chosen as the best, but the principal gave the prize to another student. She said, “You got your share, it’s only fair to give the other person an award.” By Grade 5 Alexandra was no longer first in her class, but second or third. She kept winning awards however, next for “neatest copybook in the class.”

In Ireland, secondary school began in Grade 7 and ended in Grade 12 and students wrote entrance examinations for aptitude in English, Irish language, and mathematics. Alexandra scored exceptionally well and was placed in the high academic stream. Although she excelled in English composition and the teachers always wanted her to present, she developed a fear of public speaking. She had her friends read her work for her.

In Grade 10 everyone in Ireland wrote a national examination: the students prepared for three years. No one could possibly learn all of the content so the teachers made educated guesses on what that year’s examination would cover. Unfortunately Alexandra’s teacher got it wrong. She had to weave an essay on Mao Zedong, whom she had never heard of. “The system was not as liberal as the Ontario system,” she said. “In Ireland, in the 1980s, you were just a number in a national examination, whereas here, the teacher knows you better when she marks your work.”

During her fifth year of high school, what would be Grade 11 in Ontario, she scored in the 98th percentile in mathematics and engineering, but scored below average in English. This made no sense since her essays were the models for the class, as were her debates and stories. Upon further probing she explained that on the examination day she was ill: “Back then, in Ireland, you felt it was your fault for being ill. You would never think of asking for any special consideration.”

**Adult life.** Since Ireland had high unemployment, Alexandra’s parents suggested she emigrate. Also, the late arrival of the newborn twins meant “no room for me,” Alexandra said. Alexandra came to Toronto in January, 1985, when she was 18, and took work as a nanny. In the evenings she took art at a secondary school and accounting at Centennial College. In the art course she said she “fell through the chair” when she saw her first nude model. “I was used to drawing girls in clothes.”
University. For the University of Toronto’s entrance examination, Alexandra scored 97%. She told this story of university: One day she showed up for an examination without having read the material and informed the professor that she would attend the examination, but would not submit one. When he asked her why, she said that she had not read the book yet, and wanted to save face in front of her peers. He told her she could have another week to read the materials, and could sit in on the first exam as well. She asked if there would be a different examination next week, to which he responded no. This shocked Alexandra, who came from a country where examinations were sacred.

Alexandra always showed an impudent, puckish approach to questioning the teachers in school. When studying King Lear, the professor suggested that Paris married Cordelia in order to take over the kingdom. Alexandra asked for evidence for that theory and three supporting points, as he prescribed for his students’ essays. But of course he lacked evidence for such an absurd theory. He forgave her. Her teachers tended to love her, likely because she was bright, impertinent, and good looking.

Alexandra completed four of her sixteen courses with a B average. She did not finish all of the assignments, although she did produce A material when she completed them. She had excelled in elementary and secondary school, but by this point in her life, she had a career at the bank and a child. Falling grades meant losing confidence in her academic ability. Although she had shifted focus away from school, she still chided herself. “If I had gone to school full-time, I would have failed for sure,” she said.

First marriage, first child. Alexandra married Edward, who resented her success, which she achieved so easily while he had to work so hard. Today she praises him for his strong work ethic. He had earned his own tuition for a private boys’ high school when his family lived in Chicago. His mother was a white secondary school English teacher, and his father was a black mechanic. The father was an alcoholic and the mother was a workaholic. Edward was 11 when they came to Canada.

Edward behaved somewhat cruelly during Alexandra’s pregnancy. He refused to let her mother visit and stay with them to help during the pregnancy or after Justin’s birth. Meanwhile, Edward’s own mother kept him close, giving him counsel. Even when he and Alexandra were married, Edward’s mother recommended Michelle, a family friend, as a better mate. Later Alexandra and he divorced, and Michelle became his second wife.

Justin was two when Edward and Alexandra separated. They had joint custody but, when it came to education, Edward made the decisions. He sent Justin to the local Catholic elementary
school, Holy Spirit, the Catholic arts school for Grades 7 and 8, and later to the Catholic boys’
high school where he taught. Justin became an A student tutored by his English teacher
grandmother in essay writing. During this time Justin spent his weekdays with Edward, and his
weekends and summers with Alexandra.

By the time the weekends came, Alexandra was exhausted. Without a car, she found it
hard to take Justin to interesting places. She felt she was a failure as a mother. Being a
practicing Irish-Catholic but divorced gave her feelings of failure and guilt. Before interviewing
her, I would have described Alexandra as immune to depression, someone who took action,
solved problems, and forestalled stress. But at the time of her first divorce she had no support,
she was alone in a foreign land, and she was physically run down. By the time I met her she had
regained her energy, control, and confidence.

When Justin came to live with her full-time at age 18, she found him a challenge. For
example, while Alexandra went out of her way to drive him to his part-time job at the bank, he
did not help her with the dishes, garbage, or other chores. “Maybe it’s time for me to re-evaluate
my time as well then,” she retorted. “It should be a joy to help your family.” Alexandra said that
she was trying to deprogram him. From her point of view, Edward and Michelle had trained him
to be like them, intellectual, but detached and self-interested.

**Career, entrepreneurship.** When Alexandra worked at the bank she was promoted to
mortgage specialist. She learned the trade and decided to launch her own business. As the owner
of an independent mortgage brokerage, Alexandra’s company eventually grew to have a staff of
eight representatives and accumulated a respectable list of clients, making the business a success
for many years.

**Second marriage, second child.** Alexandra married her second husband, Don, and they
bought a house together near Don’s parents in Etobicoke. They both worked while Don’s
parents looked after Jamie. In 1998, when Jamie was three, they separated. Jamie took the
separation very hard. Alexandra rented her own apartment nearby for one year and the
grandparents continued to provide care after school. Soon Alexandra became aware that Don’s
parents were maligning her in front of Jamie. She confronted them and they stopped, but she
moved away to a new apartment on Westwood Ave. in south Etobicoke and changed Jamie’s
school to St. Demetrius where our family met them. Three years later, in 2004, she bought a
house in Oakville but kept sending Jamie to St. Demetrius, a 25-minute commute by car.

Alexandra and Don shared custody of Jamie, with Alexandra having him from Monday
night to Saturday afternoon. (Don worked in Buffalo from Tuesday to Saturday morning.) They
had an amicable, co-operative divorce. Don noted, “I get along with her far better now that we are living apart.”

Alexandra characterized their parenting arrangement this way: “I know for Jamie it is hard to leave Don every Monday night,” she said. “He really misses him. He doesn’t miss me as much; he sees me all the time. Don’s great because he’s with him every minute of the weekend. They do fun things while I am all business, ‘Take out the garbage, do your homework, get ready for school.’” Jamie’s main complaint was that he had to “compete with my work.” When he needed time with her he likes to take her for a walk. “Let’s go for a chat,” he would say.

**Negotiating School**

**The first three schools.** Jamie moved schools often. Don favoured Adlerian psychology and wanted him placed in a private Adlerian school for JK and SK. After the separation Alexandra placed Jamie at Assumption school for Grade 1, where the school began to report his behaviour problems. When she moved to south Etobicoke, she then enrolled him in a traditional private school, Sterling Academy. She hoped that wearing a shirt, a tie, and a blazer would help him conform to the school’s standards. Jamie hated Sterling. Soon he figured out that if he misbehaved he would be asked to leave. By Christmas he was gone.

**St. Demetrius.** Alexandra’s next stop was the neighbourhood Catholic school, St. Demetrius, where Liam and I met him in the last two weeks of Grade 1. There I noticed Jamie playing such tricks as sticking out his foot to trip another student as that boy went to the washroom. St. Demetrius had already urged Alexandra to apply for Jamie to attend a treatment centre for at least the first term of Grade 2 and we did not see him again until January of that school year.

**Treatment Centre.** The Lawrence Centre ran special classes for children with behaviour problems, staffed by teachers seconded from school boards, as well as its own counsellors, psychologists, and youth workers. The Centre provided a short intensive program with a return to home school after one term. The program was comprehensive, including family counselling, individual counselling for the child, and a social skills program. Counselling for Jamie focused mainly on the trauma of his parents’ divorce when he was three. Meanwhile, instruction at the Grade 2 level continued.

Being admitted to a behaviour class in a treatment centre had a powerful impact; There Jamie attained sufficient self control to return to St. Demetrius for the second term of Grade 2. His most outrageous behaviours diminished greatly, but still he acted up far more than your average St. Demetrius student.
The next six years at St. Demetrius. During the transition back to regular school, the Board provided him his own teacher assistant. This assistant told me that he saw Jamie now more as a victim of the provocations of other students rather than an instigator. Various individuals in the class would goad him into acting up, and even lie about his behaviour. After moving house three times, Jamie and Alexandra finally had some stability living at her Westwood Avenue apartment in the catchment of St. Demetrius. There Jamie laid down roots and made friends with students such as Liam, and the staff learned to deal with his eccentricities.

When Alexandra bought her house in Oakville, she decided to keep him at St. Demetrius. Jamie was now in Grade 4 and she felt that he had found a comfortable place. Unfortunately this led to the strains of commuting: waiting for pickup, wasting time on the commute, living far from friends, and later in Grade 7 and 8 taking a lonely GO train ride home. Jamie and Alexandra managed to keep his social life going with friends coming out for sleepovers in Oakville and Jamie camping out with friends in Etobicoke. Playing video games online also helped.

Defending Jamie. Alexandra and Don understood Jamie’s propensity to act up. As with Jennifer when she was a child, Jamie’s smart remarks, quips, and arguments were his way of claiming for himself a role within the social situation. He received appreciation from his peers and some teachers recognized the intelligence behind his shenanigans. Jamie, because of his attitude and behaviour, tended to get into conflicts with teachers and principals. When this happened Alexandra would call in Don to advocate. Don would happily voice disagreement when he felt it necessary, as when Jamie’s French teacher humiliated him by arbitrarily refusing to let him take a French test he had prepared for. Don and I planned the discussion beforehand, whether he should drop in or phone ahead, and so forth. He stepped in and took the teacher to task, after which point she admitted fault and later apologized to Jamie.

On another occasion, Jamie arrived late for the end of recess lineup bell. That day there was snow on the ground, but the boys tended to have their coats and gloves inside as running around kept them warm. For his punishment, the teacher ordered Jamie to do push-ups in the snow. Veronica and I advised Don that forcing push-ups inflicts physical pain and could be viewed as corporal punishment.

According to the Ontario Education Act of 1990, a teacher can use discipline as would a kind, firm, and judicious parent, (Government of Ontario, 1992) but the courts discourage the use of force. Judges have deemed some incidents of force by a teacher as an assault, a criminal
offence. The principal therefore took Don’s concern seriously and phoned the Board to question the definition of corporal punishment. That teacher stopped using push-ups as a disciplinary measure.

Don’s interventions made teachers cautious, just as his own father’s interventions had protected him from irrational disciplinary measures. When Don attended elementary school, he was hyperactive. The teacher actually tied him to his chair to prevent him from becoming disruptive. His father stepped in to put a stop to this. Because of his own troubles in school, he could empathize with Jamie’s and stand up for him. Don also listened carefully to Jamie’s stories of school and counselled him on succeeding academically and avoiding conflicts.

**A conversation about a special education assessment.** In Grade 6, St. Demetrius requested a special education assessment. Interestingly, when Alexandra and I were discussing the assessment, Veronica (a special education consultant) joined the talk.

The assessment showed that he was learning disabled. Alexandra questioned some of the report. She thought the assessor misunderstood some of Jamie’s responses which she easily understood from knowing him so well. Veronica noted that all assessments are deemed to be snapshots dependent on a particular time and space. She advised Alexandra that when the assessor provides the report, if she disagreed with it, she could tell the assessor. Her observations of her son in the home life would be given plenty of credence, and most likely the report would be modified accordingly.

The report noted that Jamie had difficulty following more than one instruction at a time. That reminded Alexandra of how hard he found changing the milk bags. First Jamie needed step-by-step instructions, and second he could not operate scissors. In addition to needing detailed directions, he could not manipulate things. Alexandra said, “In all fairness, I never taught him. He can’t cut his nails, he can’t tie his own shoelaces . . .” Veronica added, “That might be where the disability lies.”

Alexandra responded by saying that “[The assessor] said that he has difficulty processing information from his brain to his hands; his fine motor skills aren’t there. The assessor suggested he do exercises to give him hand strength.” Such poor coordination and muscle tone caused him trouble keeping up with note-taking in class. Veronica inquired whether he has had occupational therapy, to which Alexandra said he had.

Alexandra had expected the assessor to write that Jamie has problems with attention. Veronica observed that attention issues are commonly viewed as a learning disability, a problem with mental processing; however his lack of attention could also be situational, caused by
insufficient sleep, depression, or disinterest. Alexandra made a connection to boring lessons, a frequent complaint of Jamie. He never had trouble paying attention to video games.

In discussing the assessment, Alexandra revealed a conundrum. On the one hand, she viewed Jamie as “lazy, defiant, and obstinate.” On the other hand, she recognized that he suffered from a disability. For example, one morning Jamie explained that he could not participate in that day’s pizza party because he forgot to return the pizza request form to his teacher. When he asked for money to go out for lunch she resisted, saying that he “wasn’t careful enough.” He asked, “Why aren’t you there to support me?” to which she responded, “This happened because you were careless.” Jamie became so furious that he banged the hood of the car. Alexandra then told him to stop, or else he would not be allowed to ride in the car. “I’m always of two minds,” she said. “Should I be his saviour, because you’re supposed to see family as solace, or say to him, ‘You need to learn these skills in life, and my duty is to make sure you do?’ ”

“He’s underperforming because he’s not doing his best. If he could invest the energy that he puts into his videogames into schooling, he has the capacity to be a straight A student.” As an example, she described taking out the garbage. “It’s such a sloppy job, it’s not done properly. He’ll complain and move at a tortoise’s pace.” On one occasion, garbage day was shifted to Saturday, when Alexandra was away from the house. She called Jamie to get him to take out the trash, and yet he failed to remove two of the three bags. She later asked him why, to which he responded that he did not understand her instructions. “Then it’s your responsibility to ask for clarification,” Alexandra retorted. “I can’t even trust that when I give an instruction it’s done.”

Alexandra recognized that trying to follow her instructions created anxiety in Jamie. She compared it to one of her bosses who so intimidated her that by the time he was finished giving instructions, “I could hardly remember my own name . . . You can’t expect someone to progress and be proficient if you don’t instil confidence in them.”

The assessor also had good news: Jamie’s verbal reasoning scores were at the 98th percentile, and the Board would provide a free laptop for his school work. Veronica said that the learning disabled designation would help even in university, because that institution too would accommodate his difficulties.

Alexandra had always been successful in school. She became a successful business person with many employees. Perhaps her success made her a little impatient with her son, Jamie. She may not have understood the seriousness of his learning disability. On the surface he seemed lazy. Probably he was concealing looking foolish by avoiding certain tasks. Even the
steps required in taking out the garbage could be daunting for him. Alexandra tried to understand but found it difficult.

**Tutoring.** Back in Grade 4, even before his assessment, Alexandra concluded that Jamie’s attention issues, disdain for school, and love of video games distracted him from his homework. Alexandra casted about for solutions. First she hired a secondary school student who supervised him after school and attempted to have him complete his assignments. The main subject that Jamie hated and refused to tackle was mathematics. When this young woman quit, Alexandra focused on finding a professional tutor. She originally asked me, but I declined. I offered to help her negotiate with the school for extra help instead, but she never took me up on that offer. By Grade 5 she had hired a professional tutoring company near the school. Often Jamie would stop at our house on the way to his tutoring and I would prod him to attend his session: “And then the whining school boy . . . creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school” (Shakespeare, 2013). Alexandra would then meet him there after her work and take him home to Oakville. Jamie spent at least a year in tutoring and enjoyed the one-on-one attention. When I asked her what she thought of it, she said: “It was a big waste of money. The content of the tutoring academy did not parallel that of the day school.”

**Cardinal Lesage.** When our family first observed Cardinal Lesage, we found it lackadaisical. I had already come to that conclusion from substitute teaching there. Unfortunately for Jamie, Lesage fulfilled its initial impression. The casual, laid-back approach worked against Jamie’s learning disability and disdain for school. Alexandra reported little help from the school’s special education department. His reports showed grades in the 50s and 60s and a failure in mathematics in each of Grade 9 and Grade 10, which led to summer school both years. Jamie was unimpressed with his fellow students at Lesage, making only three friends. Alexandra decided to take drastic action.

**Ignatius Loyola, Grade 11.** Alexandra decided to move Jamie to Ignatius Loyola but this time she wanted to spare Jamie the travel time. She rented out her house in Oakville and took an apartment in Etobicoke within walking distance of Loyola. Now Jamie had returned to Liam and his St. Demetrius friends, most of whom took school far more seriously than Jamie. Alexandra hoped that serious classmates and a more academic school would redeem him.

She even proposed a scheme whereby Liam and Jamie would come over to her house after school to complete homework. I was skeptical, fearing that Liam would fail to elevate Jamie’s academic efforts but rather Liam and Jamie would both succumb to video gaming.
(Alexandra had no idea of how much Liam needed parental structure to achieve his honour roll status.)

Regardless, Liam kyboshed the proposal. By Grade 11, Liam’s favourite after school activity involved hanging out at his friend Mike’s teen den. That might include supper. Liam scheduled his homework for “sometime later.”

Despite the setback in peer mentoring, the school (particularly the guidance and special education departments) acquitted itself very professionally. From the moment of receiving the application to transfer schools, the guidance department (which handles admissions) gave Jamie every consideration. Veronica’s influence helped, since she knew the guidance teacher in charge of Jamie’s file. In fact, with Ignatius Loyola near capacity, the school could have declined a new student with Jamie’s record. Instead, guidance made a wise plan to switch Jamie from academic to applied mathematics, offer him less strenuous courses such as media and leadership, direct him to teachers who would empathize with his special needs, and suggested courses such as history where he would shine. All that led to a happier year with more friends he could relate to but no great improvement in his grades. In fact, he ended up failing a course. Instead of going to summer school again, the school suggested that he take a seventh course in Grade 12 (six is normal). Liam yelled at him to work harder; I asked Liam to show empathy for his learning disability.

**Ignatius Loyola, Grade 12.** After the tremendous sacrifice of moving house to attend Ignatius Loyola, Alexandra’s fortune changed for the worse. The major banks had gradually curtailed their use of independent mortgage brokers, so she quit working independently and took a position at the TD bank. She no longer could afford an $1800 a month apartment. Her boyfriend invited her (with Jamie) to live in his condominium, but Jamie hated him and refused to live there. Instead Jamie chose to live at his father’s townhouse with his father’s roommate, a 40-minute bus ride from Loyola.

Don worked several days a week in the United States, and Jamie lacked the maturity and the skills to manage his time and activities responsibly when his father was absent. The allure of video games drew him away from school work. Since taking full-time care of Jamie, Don had cut back his work in Buffalo, but unfortunately Jamie still had much unsupervised time. His dad left for work at 6:30 a.m. while Jamie had a spare first period, which meant starting classes at 10:00 a.m. If Don left him sleeping, he would often miss the first class or the whole day.

Jamie hoped to go to university, and had the intelligence for that. His Grade 12 marks would determine whether he could gain admission and, if so, which university would accept
him. In his last semester he took history and economics. In history he scored 92%, but in economics his scores were in the 20s.

Economics required mathematics, which did not fit Jamie’s aptitudes. Functions, relations, and calculus caused Jamie to seize up with anxiety. The theoretical and conceptual side of economics Jamie could grasp, but the mathematics paralyzed him.

Don and Jamie met with the economics teacher to devise strategies to achieve success. The teacher bent over backwards to help. First he offered to ignore all of Jamie’s term work up to the time of the meeting and to base the entire evaluation on future term work and the final examination. Second, he offered to meet with Jamie every morning before class to coach him through his difficulties. Finally, he proposed assigning to him a peer tutor. Jamie did not make it to those morning meetings, nor did he accept a peer tutor. For the next term test he played hooky.

At the time of this writing, while Jamie’s classmates are now in the second year of university, Jamie has been trying to complete his secondary school courses and upgrade his marks so that he can apply for university. He has switched his focus from the arts to mathematics, science, and chemistry, and is attending an adult education centre that he finds a good match for his learning style.

Reflections

Negotiating special needs. Before a parent can negotiate school for the learning disabled child with behaviour issues, she needs to gain a good understanding of her child’s condition and what he needs. That can be a conundrum. The parent wants to understand the particular mental processes that interfere with learning, make allowances, and build supports. On the other hand, the parent needs to address the child’s poor choices such as shirking chores, substituting video games for homework, and tripping students on the way to the washroom. The parent needs to give the child direction and discipline but know when to show understanding, accommodation, and patience.

Managing behaviour. The fight about bringing home the pizza form illustrates a futile attempt to teach the child responsibility. That resulted in Jamie’s tantrum. In Veronica’s behaviour classes, workers managed the environment and made plans to forestall triggers that evoked behavioural/emotional reactions. Similarly, given Jamie’s learning disability, Alexandra could have made arrangements with his teacher to contact her in the event of any obvious slips-ups.
Whenever Alexandra would seek my advice I would suggest that she stay above the
game ("like a croupier in the casino," I said), avoid reacting and sparring, and make a behaviour
plan using positive reinforcement. "He loves money to buy video games," I said. "Cut off the
free money. Pay him to do homework, chores, and show organization." Often, however, she
would default to moral exhortations, arguments and criticism reminiscent of the rough and
tumble communication of her own family.

Alexandra and Don followed Adlerian psychology and she took parenting courses in that
discipline. The psychology based its behaviour management on consequences for actions,
natural and logical. But it takes iron discipline to apply these consequences consistently and
reasonably. For example, if he refused to eat his supper his mother would cut off his television.
Soon Jamie would apologize, and she would relent. She was like the father of the prodigal son,
showing forgiveness and generosity, but lacked a consistent behaviour management plan.

Alexandra blamed Jamie for irresponsibility, but did not appreciate the possibility of
teaching him responsibility. Because she learned so quickly on her own, she overlooked the
power of direct teaching in a step-by-step manner. Anything can be taught, including
responsibility.

Irish upbringing. In many ways Alexandra’s upbringing exemplified the hardy Irish-
Catholic family, one in which every member was expected to pull his or her weight and take
their licks without complaint. Alexandra had a rebellious side similar to Jamie’s, but she was
better at balancing her desire to act up with her need to bring home good marks. As the eldest
child, Alexandra became resilient, confident, and strong by leading her siblings in games and
play fights, and by the expectation that she be a strong role model for her brothers and sisters.

Alexandra’s own school experiences were much different than Jamie’s. Growing up in
the Irish-Catholic school system, she suffered corporal punishment, belittlement at the hands of
teachers, and a school system that was steeped in structure. Alexandra not only coped with this
system, she thrived. She excelled in her studies, acted up in ways that endeared her to her
teachers, and brought her buoyant mood home with her after school.

Later, when she came to Canada, Alexandra’s personality and charm led her to succeed
in post-secondary school until she grew disinterested and decided to focus on family and career.
In her role at the bank her people skills were immensely valuable, so much so that she was
inspired to start her own business. In that endeavor, her hard-working nature and drive to
succeed caused her business to flourish for many years.
Her ability to learn quickly and adapt to any situation made her less tolerant of her son’s immature behaviour. She looked back on her own experiences and could not see why Jamie lacked her school-life balance. Alexandra saw Jamie’s intelligence and natural abilities and could not reconcile them with his lack of academic success and unwillingness to contribute to the house work. It is hard not to project one’s own experiences, skills, and successes onto one’s child.

**Private school.** Alexandra put Jamie into a private traditional school for his kindergarten. Jamie was learning disabled, oppositional, and very upset about his parents’ divorce. Alexandra mistakenly hoped that the private traditional school, with its uniforms, authority, and discipline, would somehow fix her disturbed and unhappy child. She thought she could put on him the clothing of discipline without first coping with the boy’s distress. This strategy failed, and before Christmas, at the behest of the headmaster, she transferred him to the neighbouring Catholic school.

**Learning disability with behavioural problems.** Jamie was formally identified as having a learning disability after his Grade 6 assessment. According to Special Education: A Guide for Educators (Ministry of Education, 2001), a learning disability is “a disorder evident in both academic and social situations that involves one or more of the processes necessary for the proper use of spoken language or the symbols of communication.”

While he was not formally identified as having a behaviour exceptionality back in Grade 2, it is clear to those who have known him for most of his life that he exhibits such characteristics including “excessive fears and anxieties,” “tendency to compulsive reaction,” and “an inability to learn that cannot be traced to intellectual, sensory, or other health factors.” However, a special education consultant (Veronica) suggested that his situation was not severe enough to warrant his being identified as behaviourally challenged.

From my experience as a consultant in rougher neighbourhoods of the city, I noticed that misbehaviour such as Jamie’s could be managed internally. Only at a school like St. Demetrius, with its affluent and activist parents, would the staff have recommended a treatment centre.

**The identification of a learning disability.** The background and context of Jamie’s identification, the institutional aspect, is interesting. Despite attending the Lawrence Treatment Centre for behavioural and emotional issues, St. Demetrius did not refer him for an Identification Placement Review Committee (IPRC) for his behaviour. Perhaps this occurred because the Lawrence Centre takes a family system approach and regarded his acting out as a symptom of the distress he experienced when his parents divorced. He was not assessed by an
IPRF until four years later in Grade 6. That assessment led to Jamie’s LD identification with no reference to his behaviour.

The assessor was a teacher, a special education consultant, supervised by the Board’s chief psychologist to give educational assessments. In the TCDSB, it was the chief psychologist who, upon reviewing the consultant’s data, determines that the child had a learning disability. This educational term leads to identification and placement. If the psychologist gives more tests, that could lead to a diagnosis, which is more of a psychiatric medical term. Such a diagnosis might be more helpful in presenting the case to accessibility centres in universities and colleges. However, most post-secondary institutions will give accommodations based on the simpler educational identification.

**Resisting the learning disability.** Helping one’s learning disabled child requires a great deal of understanding and skill. Many parents of learning disabled children join the Learning Disability Association of Ontario, where they can receive support, take part in discussions, and advocate for the LD population as a whole. The services that the LD identification allowed Jamie included the following: a teacher assistant, a laptop with helpful software geared towards LD students, and more time to write tests in a quiet place if needed.

Upon entry into Ignatius Loyola, the attentive guidance counselor recommended more tests by a psychologist to update and continue his status as an LD student, but that did not happen. Jamie did not use the accommodations offered him: he never used his laptop’s special education software, he ignored his teacher assistant, and never took advantage of arrangements with teachers for accommodations. Such denial is not unusual for students with a learning disabled identification (Barton, 2012).

**Advocating for the LD child.** The parent of the learning disabled child needs to ensure that the school is delivering services. The pizza story illustrates the school’s responsibility to the learning disabled student. Teachers should foresee that the LD student may forget the pizza form and check that he returned it. When the form does not come back, the teacher could contact the parent. Unfortunately, the pizza story took place in Grade 5 and the Board identified him in Grade 6. Advocating for the LD child is almost impossible when the child is exhibiting exceptionalities that have yet to be formally identified.

**Changing schools.** In his early life Jamie changed schools five times. Research shows that frequent changing of schools has a deleterious effect. Probably this changing of schools did not help the system take note of his LD traits until Grade 6.
Outcomes-based education. The teachers asked Alexandra to go up to the board to do the homework, and she would always know it. She said this let her “get away with blue murder,” such as skipping homework. According to outcomes-based education (Spady, 1993), if the student can demonstrate that he knows the concept, then the teacher can stop assigning exercises on that topic. Teachers have trouble excusing some students, who have mastered the concepts, from completing the exercises. Doing homework indicates compliance, which teachers require.

Public speaking. At home, Alexandra was a great performer of stories for her sisters. In school, from age eight to seventeen, Alexandra had a phobia of reading to the class. But in her professional life she speaks publicly often and confidently. Ironically, instead of school preparing her for life, the situation inhibited her. After casting off school, her natural ability returned.

Pedagogy: traditional versus progressive. Jamie often complained about boring lessons. Alexandra, referring to her experience in the business world, noted that, “When they train you as an adult, they never think about standing and lecturing and having you listen. It’s all about interaction. They have you react and explain or talk to a person beside you and reiterate and ask questions. Yet our children are still expected to learn in a very backward way.”

A child such as Jamie could make use of lecture method only if it is a topic of interest. “If there were a lecture on video games,” said Alexandra, “I guarantee Jamie would jump up with clarification and correction. But if he doesn’t find the information stimulating, forget it.” Most teachers know that learning becomes exciting when interactive. Unfortunately, the pressure to “cover curriculum” compels teachers to simply transmit the information.

Assessing the assessor. Referring to the special education consultant, Alexandra really liked her, “She was nice, but pretty strict. She said, ‘Look at you, you lucky boy, with all the amenities, these privileges. You need to smarten up and do your best.’ I was impressed with that attitude.”

At the same time, the assessor questioned if he was paying attention. “Yes,” he said, “I’m paying attention, I’m listening to you.” But the consultant responded, “I see that you are lost in thought.” Alexandra’s personal practical knowledge of Jamie told her that he was definitely paying attention. Given the assessor’s misinterpretation, Alexandra wondered about the accuracy of the assessment.

Problem solving. Alexandra considered herself to be a good problem solver, and Jamie as well. For example, Alexandra’s business partner once tried to take control of the office. Jamie
gave Alexandra this advice: “Don’t worry, your agents have become your friends, they’ll stay with you. And even if they don’t, you have the skills to set up a new business and be successful again.”

“He’s very insightful, and he cares,” Alexandra said. This discussion about Jamie’s problem-solving exemplifies a major theme of the thesis; school might reveal a child’s deficits, but real life may show practical intelligence and practical problem-solving skills.

Paying attention and video games. I noted that Jamie is focused when playing a video game. Alexandra added that he can be “extremely focused and knowledgeable.” Veronica pointed out that video games are high feedback and require a high degree of concentration and interactive participation. Alexandra responded by noting, “They say people learn a great deal more if they interact. If I throw information at you, you gain a certain percentage. If you actually write it or engage in it, you learn a lot more.”

Defying the system. Alexandra’s story reveals an intelligent, precocious child who could beat the system. A great deal of energy and intelligence within school gets diverted towards beating the system. This practice helps make school intellectually challenging and interesting, though it has nothing to do with any subject matter.

Alexandra, like Lara, was by nature a spunky, impertinent child. School negotiators need a little rebelliousness in order to cut the conformist’s ties to the system.

What is the psychology behind Alexandra not completing assignments? Alexandra’s own theory of underachieving concerns her place in the family. Because she was the eldest she felt it was expected of her to act mature, though she felt like being childish. She resented the constant pressure to behave in an adult manner. This rebellious attitude also manifests itself in her career. She refused to get her broker’s licence.

Divorce. As with Lara, divorce complicated Alexandra’s school negotiation. Some children accept and even agree with their parents’ divorce. They adapt and enjoy having two households. Jamie took divorce badly. With Alexandra having Jamie for five days and Don two, Jamie longed for his father. That break-up deprived him of daily contact with his grandparents, who adored him. The treatment centre attempted to deal with his pain and anger through family therapy. But such short-term therapy was not enough to heal Jamie’s wounds. Psychologists might say that his rage and frustration led to his acting out. From age 6 to 14 I noticed that he never gave up hope that his mother and father would reconcile. Whenever a suitor came to Alexandra’s door, he would do his best to drive him away.
Financial woes. As with Lara, problems of marriage, relationship, and finances can disrupt the school negotiations. Moving neighbourhoods and transferring Jamie to a better-managed school seemed intelligent and promising. However, fortune upset her plan. While the plan worked in the beginning, other factors got in the way. Suddenly Jamie returned to a less supervised home life and long commutes. School negotiators can be subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Karma. Alexandra said that Jamie’s lack of hand-eye co-ordination stemmed from her, and that there was no way he could have got it from Don, who is very athletic. When he was annoyed once he said, “I’m this way because of you.” Alexandra responded by saying, “No, you’re this way because of you, and it’s your responsibility to work around it.” Her son responded by saying, “You’ve been listening to Dr. Phil this morning, haven’t you?” I noted that it is karma, that the treatment she gave her poor suffering parents was coming back to haunt her.
Chapter Four: The Negotiating School Strategies  
Analysis, Synthesis, and Interpretation

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the many ways parents can navigate the system of schooling to better suit a child’s needs or a family’s values. Parents may believe that there are only a few ways to educate their child: public school, private school, or homeschooling. There is actually a wide range of choices available. The school negotiators in this study attempted many different options before finding the school negotiating strategies that best suited their children.

The Continuum of School Negotiation

The continuum, which arose from the stories of my participants, begins with zero or minimal school negotiating and ends with unschooling. Although I never intended to cover all of the possible categories of school negotiating, this study led to many distinct strategies that seem to cover most of the territory.

Zero or minimal school negotiation

Unschooling

The continuum concerns who controls and influences the child. At one end of the spectrum the parent hands the child over, giving the state control and responsibility for the school day and the homework night. Zero school negotiating implies zero parental interference. At the other end, unschooling, the parents exercise complete control of the child, usually within a philosophy of child-centred, free choice learning. Unschoolers cast out the state with all its school milieu, subject matter, and teacher-student relationships (Schwab, 1978).

Between these two extremes, I discuss various ways of negotiating school. I abstract these strategies from the stories of my life, my participants’ lives, and those of our children. One participant may use more than one approach. She may begin with a radical approach before turning to a more moderate one. These shifts in strategies can move in either direction on the continuum, to any point the school negotiator chooses to be or finds herself. I include a chart
that names each strategy, defines it, and lists each participant that used it or considered using it. The participant column includes how the participant negotiated school for her child and also how her parents negotiated school for her.

In this chapter, I analyze the strategies by first defining each concept, often using a dictionary of education, but also ascribing to it my personal interpretation of its meaning. Then, I look at the related narratives from my family’s experiences and the experiences of my participants that gave rise to the identification of these strategies. Finally I discuss and analyze the strategies themselves based on my observations, insights, and the literature.
### The Strategies Used By the Participants of Negotiating School

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1) Zero or Minimal School Negotiating</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1) Zero or minimal school negotiating</td>
<td>Trusting the child to the school system without any interference; using little or no negotiation. The opposite of intensive parenting (Arai, 2000; Aurini, 2005).</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Mario, Anna, Robert, Lara, Jennifer, Alexandra.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2) Helping the Child With School</strong></td>
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<td>2a) Metaschooling</td>
<td>Teaching the child to understand the intricacies of school, how it works, and how best to succeed within its structures (Gatto, 2002).</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Mario, Anna, Jennifer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2b) Public schooling with private lessons, tutoring, and extracurricular activities</td>
<td>Enrolling the child in public school to receive subject matter mandated by the government (Olson, 2003) while also providing lessons, tutors, or extracurricular activities that enhance the child’s life experience.</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Mario, Robert, Lara, Jennifer, Alexandra.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3) Choosing Between the Tax-Funded Schools</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>3a) Negotiating between public and Catholic tax-funded schools</td>
<td>Negotiating between the secular and Catholic school boards and choosing the school that best suits the child.</td>
<td>Will, Mario, Lara, Jennifer, Alexandra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b) Moving neighbourhoods to attain a preferred school</td>
<td>Moving the family to put a child within the catchment area of a particular school, allowing enrolment.</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Mario, Lara, Alexandra.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### 4) Using Other Tax-Funded Schooling Options

| 4a) Public alternative schools | Enrolling the child in a school that follows a progressive, Deweyan curriculum comprised of child-centred learning | Allan, Mario, Anna, Lara, Alexandra. |
| 4b) Magnet schools | Schools focused on one particular subject or demographic, or a philosophy of education (McBrien & Brandt, 1997) including art schools, Afro-centric schools, etc. | Will, Allan, Mario, Lara, Jennifer. |

### 5) Negotiating Special Education

| 5a) Special education for remediation | Using special education programs to address the special needs of a child that cannot be met in the regular classroom due to exceptionalities (Ministry of Education, 2001). | Will, Allan, Mario, Anna, Lara, Jennifer, Alexandra. |
| 5b) Special education for enrichment (gifted and talented) | Using special education programs to educate a child who has been designated gifted or talented (Ministry of Education, 2001). | Mario, Anna, Alexandra. |

### 6) Becoming Involved With the School

<p>| 6a) Close communication | Communicating clearly and constantly with the school staff in order to ensure that everyone involved is working in a manner that will benefit the child most. | Will, Mario, Lara, Jennifer, Alexandra. |
| 6b) Parental voluntarism | Volunteering in the school in order to be close to the child, win favour, and ensure that the child’s needs at school are met. | Will, Allan, Mario, Anna, Robert, Lara. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6c) Advocacy</th>
<th>Advocating on behalf of the child (usually while teaching self-advocacy skills) in order to improve schooling conditions (Shafritz et al., 1988).</th>
<th>Will, Allan, Mario, Anna, Robert, Lara.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7) Attending Private Schools</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>7a) Traditional private schools</td>
<td>Enrolling the child in a traditional private school, strongly focused on academics and tradition, which includes many boarding schools (Ravitch, 2007).</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Anna, Robert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b) Progressive private schools</td>
<td>Enrolling the child in a child-centred, progressive private school, such as a Montessori or Waldorf school (Ravitch, 2007).</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Anna, Lara, Jennifer.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8) Homeschooling</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>8a) Distance learning</td>
<td>Having the child take classes in a location other than that which the teachers present the lessons (Ravitch, 2007).</td>
<td>Will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b) Timesharing between homeschooling and institutional schooling</td>
<td>Having the child attend school part-time while receiving education at home from parents, tutors, or both.</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Anna, Lara, Jennifer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8c) Schooling at home</td>
<td>Homeschooling the child based on provincially-mandated curriculum. (Ravitch, 2007)</td>
<td>Will, Allan, Anna, Lara, Jennifer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8d) Unschooling</td>
<td>Unschooling the child, or the act of teaching a child at home, outside the system, without organized subject matter.</td>
<td>Will, Lara.</td>
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</table>
Strategy 1: Zero or Minimal School Negotiating

The concept. Zero school negotiating means enrolling the child at the neighbourhood tax-funded school, entrusting the school to do the right thing, and not interfering with the business of the school. Such detachment was more common before the sixties radical critique of education (Miller, 2002) and before the current practice of intensive parenting. Today, many parents, mainly urban affluent middle-class parents, seek involvement in their child’s schooling (Arai, 2000; Aurini & Davies, 2005).

Within many families, conversations about schools often take place. These conversations will affect the child, and these effects can be a type of school negotiating, conditioning the child’s attitudes toward schooling. I call these conversations minimal school negotiation.

Related narratives. Zero or minimal school negotiating is mainly a practice used by the parents of my participants. My participants themselves were active in school negotiating and each practiced several of the negotiating school strategies.

My parents practised minimal school negotiating. In Grade 2, when the public school took all the students to a Protestant church, my angry mother made no complaint. But the conversation we had about it at dinner helped me begin to think critically about school.

The parents of Allan, Mario, Anna, Robert, and Alexandra, practised zero school negotiating. In fact, Alexandra complained that her mother lacked initiative in finding her an early placement in kindergarten.

Jennifer’s father attempted some tutoring, an example of minimal school negotiating. However, overall, Jennifer reported that her parents’ attitude was that “the school was always right.” That led to her enduring physical and verbal abuse from her Grade 2 and Grade 3 teachers without reporting it to her parents. Jennifer’s story is an example of the worst-case scenario of zero or minimal school negotiating in this study.

Lara’s parents were the exception, with her father making a complaint to the school, teaching her the timetables, hiring her a tutor, and transferring her to the Catholic secondary school.

Discussion and analysis. Seven out of eight of my participants’ parents never attempted to influence the schooling of their child. One could conclude that leaving the child at the local school with no interference in school affairs used to be commonplace. Now, with intensive parenting (Arai, 2000; Aurini, 2005), democratic child raising (Dreikner & Cassel, 1974), helicopter parents (Honore, 2008), and published cases of child abuse by educators (both lay and clerical), our trust is conditional and parents will intervene in the affairs of schools.
Nevertheless, there is a case for letting the teachers do their job. We saw at LAS how interfering parents can poison the learning milieu. We also saw how our child, by Grade 6, rejected parental protection, preferring to “take his lumps” rather than stand out to his peers as a “whiner.” And this may have been a good thing as he tested his independence and moved out into the world (John, 2003).

Parents today are far more proactive, involved, and concerned, but some still prefer noninterference in school affairs. Veronica, my participants, and other parents that I have advised professionally often fear that the teacher or principal may retaliate against the child if the parents are active school negotiators. Out of caution, they minimize school negotiating. And they may have good reason. Throughout my years of hearing elementary school staff room talk, I have heard teachers label a child, a mother, or a family as difficult, rude, or crazy. One teacher’s judgement may spread to many and construct a negative image of a student in the group mind of an entire staff. Teachers do not always act ethically (Campbell, 2003).

When we delve deeper, we discover that sometimes what seems like zero school negotiation is, in fact, a serious, silent negotiation. Although she did not act, my mother schooled me at the dining room table in individual rights and the limits that we should give to powerful institutions. That lesson stayed in my mind; it was transformative (Miller, 2002).
Strategy 2: Helping the Child Succeed at School

Overview. Helping the child with school can involve teaching her to understand its structures, expectations, and politics, but also includes aiding with the actual school work. Helping includes hiring tutors to support school subjects, but also providing lessons and extracurricular activities that enhance a child’s life experience.

Strategy 2a: Metaschooling

The concept. Helping the child succeed at school involves what I call “metaschooling,” which is different than metacognition. Just as metacognition means “thinking about one’s own thinking” (Ravitch, 2007) metaschooling involves thinking about one’s schooling. School has institutional rituals, policies, and psychology that are distinct from simply learning (Holt, 1964; Gatto, 2002; Goodman, P., 1960). Often negotiating school concerns acting in the world, adapting the school to fit the nature of the child through such methods as moving neighbourhoods, advocacy, and homeschooling (Goodman, 1960). In this method school remains unchanged. The parent helps the child restory school (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). School becomes a game to play and win.

Metaschooling also includes parents pitching, supporting and coaching the child with the schoolwork.

Related narratives. Most of my participants succeeded at school without parental help: Allan, Anna, Alexandra, and I excelled at school on our own. Robert got passing grades and left school after Grade 12. Jennifer had some mathematics tutoring which she found unhelpful. On her own she kept up a B average and continued on to university. Lara received valuable tutoring and support from her father. Mario received help, but outside the family.

In contrast, the children of my participants received a great deal of help. In the summer before Grade 2 Veronica taught Liam to read. I rewarded him with cash incentives for high marks. If the work load became too heavy, Veronica and I would help.

Allan taught Len to read before he went to school. With Len’s problem of adapting to school, Allan encouraged him, engaged a child psychiatrist, and helped with lessons.

Mario always spoke highly of school and how it could help someone advance in society, but his two bright children needed no help with the work.

After entering school full-time in Grade 5, Paul worked independently of Anna’s help. His parents, however, were critical analysts of schools and the family regularly discussed the structure of school.
Lara passed on to her children the notion that school was not the most important experience in their lives. This helped them to value other education situations. Alexandra exhorted Jamie to apply himself more, but to little effect. Jennifer believed that children should learn independently of their parents; Robert left his children to their own resourcefulness.

**Discussion and analysis.** Some children fit the school naturally, without parental assistance. Others find learning that skill very difficult. Sometimes, when someone who was successful at school becomes a parent, the best she can do is to pass along the tips that worked for her. If those techniques do not work for her child, she goes in search of any outside resources that can help.

As evidenced by the stories of several participants, adapting to school is not necessarily genetic, nor does it necessarily come from a stable, supportive family. One brother might intuitively be a “school kid” only to see his sibling fall short. Succeeding at school may have little to do with great intelligence. The parent informing the teacher that the student aims to be an A student helps. Fostering an appetite for hard work and achievement certainly is part of the package. Even if the child has no intrinsic interest in the subject, she can still take pleasure in school by succeeding at it.

In this study, those students who struggled with school but made the transition to school success (whether in adolescence or in their adult life) often had very strong support systems, which cannot be found or bought. They are merely there when needed, and show that fitting the school is often the product of luck as much as hard work. These observations are discouraging, because as countless school kids know, school can actually be an engaging, entertaining, and meaningful experience.

Those students who are identified as special needs face even steeper challenges when attempting to fit in at school. As McCoy and Banks (2012) state, such students “face considerable barriers to fully engage in school life. They are considerably more likely to not enjoy their time spent at school” (p. 94).

Some parents instinctively know how to help the child do well at school, while others are unaware of such a possibility. For some parents this task is a priority, while others do not even consider it. When a parent has time to spare, helping the child succeed at school is easier. Other parents, very busy with their professional lives, will not have the time to devote to this project. Sometimes it is easier to work towards making the school fit the child than towards making the child fit the school. How can a child apply himself to school if he feels overwhelmed by busy work? Here the parent can help by offering to carry some of the load. When the student
understands school, it is no longer stressful. It becomes like play. Those students that fit in at school know the joy that it can bring (Goodman, 1960; Leonard, 1968; Silberman, 1970).

**Strategy 2b: Public Schooling with Private Lessons, Tutoring, and Extracurricular Activities**

**The concept.** This strategy deals with parts of the learning that occur outside the time and place of the child’s school. In metaschooling, parents may tutor or teach their child, but in this strategy the parents involve outsiders. According to Ravitch, extracurricular activities are those that “take place outside the regular academic program of the school or outside the regular school schedule” (2007, p. 93).

At the time of this writing, as the conservative restoration continues (Miller, 2002), children attend public school to receive subject matter mandated by the provincial government (Olson, 2003). This notion of curriculum some researchers compare to a pipeline (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992; Craig, 1995). This curricular pipeline keeps subject matter moving forward even when the child cannot synthesize it with the rest of her experience. Parents may use extracurricular time to reinforce school’s instruction by hiring a private tutor. This practise has seem some growth in popularity: “Over the past decade private tutoring has undergone a massive transformation in North America, evolving from a small cottage industry into a billion-dollar corporate enterprise,” (Davies, Aurini, & Quirke, 2002, p. 37).

After school the parent or child, or both in conjunction, may choose other subjects that cater to the child’s interests or the parent’s values. If they wish to supplement the school’s program, they may include classes in visual arts, dance, or sport. While some of these may seem like entertainment or play, they also educate. These voluntary educational activities are under the control of the family. In a sense they put formal schooling in its place, as just one educational venue in the child’s experience (Dewey, 1938).

**Related narratives.** For a long time, Liam resisted extracurricular activities we suggested. He said they were too much like school. His passion for knights and swords led to fencing lessons and Veronica insisted he take piano lessons. Liam joined a lacrosse team because his classmates were on it, and in secondary school fell in love with rugby, continuing it through first-year university. He also enjoyed paintball, Warhammer and video games.

Len loved all sports, especially football. Sports kept him involved with school, and were his main reason for attending.

Although Mario’s parents did nothing to get him tutors, Mario himself is a prime example of someone who benefited greatly from such help. In the psychiatric hospital and
through his adult life people mentored him to succeed academically. For his children, Mario hired a piano teacher for Michelangelo, and supported Ella’s passion for hockey by driving her to tournaments across Canada and into the United States.

Lara practically bought her children a private school’s course load worth of lessons. For whatever interested the children, Lara would find a tutor.

Although Robert was a professional guitar player, he hired a guitar teacher for Jeffrey. Jeffrey’s skill with the guitar led to a successful audition to a secondary school for the arts.

Alexandra sent Jamie to the Oxford school for tutoring in mathematics. He appreciated the one-on-one teaching, however Alexandra found no improvement in his marks. In secondary school, in fact, he needed to transfer from the academic stream to the applied. As with Liam, Warhammer and video games were a passion.

**Discussion and analysis.** Remedial tutoring can be just more school. But when private lessons engage the child’s passions, they can be joyful (Leonard, 1968). A private lesson can develop skills and open a gateway to a magnet school, an arts school, or a sports school and even have an influence on finding a self-fulfilling career. The student who loves the debating club may become a lawyer. While provincially mandated, curriculum has some outlets for individual interests; extracurricular activities chosen by the child tap into his passions.

A common mistake parents make is believing that academic, course-based tutoring has great educational value whereas hobbies are mere entertainments. In this study, when I observed the play of my participants’ children, I saw that often the opposite was true. Games, especially video games, may help build higher-order thinking skills, hand-eye coordination, and general knowledge. They may stimulate connections in the brain in ways that neuroscience has just begun to understand (Green, C. S. & Bavelier, D., 2006; Tapscott, 2008). Although many adults consider video games harmful, just as their grandparents condemned television and rock and roll, many researchers find them educational. These games develop the mind in the way that a game of chess does: stimulating the growth of synapses and higher-functioning executive abilities such as decision making (Kutner, L. & Olson, C., 2008; Tapscott, 2008).

Leong (2010) investigated a school’s extracurricular activities. He found that students who joined the debate team, the school play, or the orchestra found those passions more engaging than the prescribed curriculum. These after-school clubs became more important to the students than the regular classes. Extracurricular school life can be what makes the rest of school tolerable for students who do not naturally adapt to school, as it was for one of my
participants, whose son put up with the collegiate’s subject matter to gain the benefit of after-school sports.

Competitive, success-oriented, high-achieving parents sign up their children for extra lessons. If the extracurricular activities come from the parent and not the child they can become oppressive and stressful. Sometimes parents can push their child too hard, which can lead to anxiety, stress, and exhaustion. David Elkind noted the deleterious effects of parents pressuring children to grow up too soon (1987). Schiffrin, Godfrey, Liss, & Erchull (2014) showed that intensive parenting with its “expensive and time-consuming activities” does not ensure the child’s health, happiness, and success (p.1). And in 2014’s Parenting Culture Studies, the authors note that “this over-scheduling, hyper-vigilant culture is not necessarily ideal for children” (Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, & Macvarish, p. 34). Pushing a child into extra lessons may in fact create resentment for that subject matter and a barrier to learning it later in life (Honoré, 2008).

Tutoring is more understandable when a child is doing poorly and a little extra help may make the difference between school success or failure. That may help the student’s self-esteem. He will feel proud to keep up with his peers. Any student who has somehow fallen behind for lack of instruction may catch up using a tutor.

Just because a parent has a skill such as playing the guitar does not mean that she is best suited to teach it. Sons often prefer keeping the roles of teacher and father separate (Elkind, 1987). A teacher from outside the family may be the best idea.

An hour of professional tutoring once or twice a week will not necessarily lead to better grades. Tutoring is not always easy. A tutor generally is an outsider, unfamiliar with the child, the family, or the child’s classroom milieu. Tutoring often fails. On the other hand, expectations may be unrealistic. A tutor may be expected to accelerate a child’s learning but may in fact succeed only in preventing more decline. I believe that every academic tutor should seek a conference with the classroom teacher and try to synchronize with that teacher. Using the same texts helps. When the tutor introduces her own unique program, the struggling student may become more confused.

When I saw Jamie after a day of Grade 4, hauling his school bag to the tutoring school for another hour of mathematics, my heart went out to him. I knew that more lessons were not what he needed. What he needed was a talented classroom teacher or special education teacher who appreciated his intelligence while giving him the tools to overcome his learning disability.
Some students are actually repulsed by school and its restrictions. Once introduced to private lessons that engage their interests, they can be drawn away from school as an institution entirely. They only want independent learning. Although private lessons that match the child’s interests can lead to growth, they can be worrisome if they undermine the value of institutional learning. In this age, in this society, the world of work demands credentialed learning (Olson, 2003). Some clever, creative souls can get around that, but most of us cannot. Instead of hiring tutors, it may be wiser for the parent to save money and practise close communication with the school’s teachers. Another idea would be to host a study group with a couple of the child’s classmates acting as mutual peer tutors. They can talk out their assignment. Using this method combines school work, incidental learning, and socializing.

With private lessons, tutoring, and extracurricular activities, families pick up where the school leaves off, focusing especially on the individual child’s intrinsic enthusiasm for some topic or other.
**Strategy 3: Choosing Between the Tax-Funded Schools**

**Overview.** In Ontario, parents may have a choice between enrolling their child in the public or Catholic school systems. Beyond that, parents can move house to be in the catchment of a preferred school or, alternatively, send their child to a school outside the boundaries of their neighbourhood school.

**Strategy 3a: Negotiating between Public and Catholic Tax-Funded Schools**

**The concept.** In Ontario, we have tax-funded public and tax-funded Catholic schools. Catholics have the option of attending either school system. Less commonly known, non-Catholics have the right to attend Catholic secondary schools and are excused from religious education classes, liturgies, and retreats (Alphonso, 2014). Also, the TCDSB elementary school panel accepts non-Catholics if at least one parent is taking courses leading to initiation into the Catholic Church. The existence of two school systems creates more opportunities to negotiate school.

**Related narratives.** Although I was raised Catholic, I began school in the public school system because it alone offered kindergarten. I did not enter the Catholic system until Grade 3, when we moved to Etobicoke, and I stayed in Catholic schools until Grade 12. I then transferred to York Memorial for Grade 13 because we had again moved. Liam moved from St. Demetrius to LAS for SK, and then back to St. Demetrius for Grade 2. He remained in the Catholic system for secondary.

Because she wanted to be with her friends, Marion asked Lara to place her at St. Demetrius. Lara enrolled Marion in a Catholic school despite the fact that neither Marion nor her parents were baptised Catholic. By altering and using her mother’s baptismal certificate, Lara was able to register Marion there.

Robert and Jennifer as children had suffered in the Catholic school system: Robert never considered sending his children there; Jennifer never considered sending her children to any tax-funded schools.

My four other participants never practised this strategy.

**Discussion and analysis.** Negotiating school by moving from Catholic school to public or public to Catholic may provide the child a place that suits the child’s nature or the parent’s values. In the same neighbourhood the Catholic school might be traditional and the public school progressive or vice versa. At different times in her life, the child might need one approach more than the other.
Altering a baptismal certificate and presenting it as your own may seem unethical. But if the elementary school is not at capacity, it is difficult to see what harm it causes. After all, the secondary panel of the Catholic school system in Ontario admits non-Catholics. However, if the school is at capacity, the non-Catholic student may be taking away a place that rightfully belongs to a Catholic student.

Some Catholic parents, angry with the Catholic schools of their youth, refuse to use them. For other parents neither system will do. Private schooling is their only solution. We see this syndrome throughout negotiating school: I call it “fighting the last war.” Parents who were hurt, perhaps traumatized, by a certain school or school system may have a failure of imagination. Their past experiences inform their decision to keep their children away from that system. They overlook the possibility that, 25 years after they were children, what they felt to be a violent, vapid place may now be an engine promoting the love of learning.

Some non-Catholics, non-Christians, or agnostics may worry about exposing their child to Catholic doctrine. Catholic elementary schools, for most of the day, teach the same subject matter mandated by the Ministry of Education as the public schools. A prayer at the beginning and end of day, 30 minutes of religious education per day, and the occasional Mass are the only differences with the public board.

In 1986, when the government extended full funding to Catholic secondary schools, the bill required Catholic schools to admit non-Catholic students without compelling them to attend religious education courses. In 2014, the Ontario Superior Court also extended these exceptions to include liturgies and retreats (Alphonso, 2014). Non-Catholics in Catholic secondary schools need have no worry about Catholic indoctrination.

Veronica and I both attended private Catholic secondary schools. Government funding at that time only covered Catholic elementary schools. In my years there (1960 to 1964) the pedagogy matched the definition of traditional education: “books, lecture, recitation, and practise” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 174). The learning, however, was often intellectually stimulating. That was so because of the intelligence, depth, and style of some of the priest teachers.
Strategy 3b: Moving Neighbourhoods to Attain a Preferred School

The concept. Parents who can afford it can move house for the sake of a highly-ranked school. Based upon the EQAO tests given in Grades 3, they find which schools are ranked highly. (Organizations such as the Fraser Institute publish findings based on EQAO results annually [Fraser Institute, 2014].) Real estate agents will use a highly-rated school as a feature on the listing of a house for sale. In some cases, the high scores on tests are not the motive for moving neighbourhoods. The parents may want a child-friendly neighbourhood that has a school known to have kind, friendly teachers.

A second definition of this strategy has the family remain in its original neighbourhood but has the child attend a school outside the local catchment. A school that has not reached its maximum capacity will accept outsiders. Also, if a student was already enrolled but the family has subsequently moved away, the school will usually keep that child on its roster.

When schools are at capacity they are closed to students outside the catchment area. However, guerrilla approaches can overcome the catchment problem. Some parents have reported their address as that of a friend or relative who lives within the boundaries of that school.

Related narratives. Our family moved house from a neighbourhood with a low-ranking school to a neighbourhood with a high-ranking school, and that was one of the reasons for our move. After that high-ranking school disappointed, we sent Liam to an alternative school outside of our neighbourhood.

All but one of the schools that Allan sent Len to were out of neighbourhood. The only school that Len attended that was in his catchment was the collegiate, Deerbourne.

Mario moved his son out of district to a high-ranking elementary school. He then moved Michelangelo to a magnet school for music. Mario’s daughter attended the local public school and then the local Catholic school. However, for academic and social reasons she travelled out of her neighbourhood to St. Luke, a school in an affluent neighbourhood that scored highly on the EQAO rankings. Her chosen secondary school was out of district, but also at capacity. Mario claimed his friend’s address as their residence so Ella could attend.

Lara sent Marion out of district to St. Demetrius for friendship reasons.

Jamie stayed at St. Demetrius even after Alexandra moved 25 kilometres away. In secondary school, Alexandra moved house so that Jamie could be in the catchment of Ignatius Loyola.
Anna sent Maria, and Jennifer sent her boys, out of neighbourhood to attend distant private schools.

Robert never used this strategy, although he had good reason to.

**Discussion and analysis.** Parents can move house to be in the catchment of a certain school or send their child to school outside their neighbourhood. Parents have many reasons: to expose their child to preferred social groups, to find a safe place, to find a balance between structure and freedom, to continue in a school they already have ties to, or to simply find any school that will accept their child.

Most commonly, families move to a highly ranked academic school. They then may find that they want empathy more than academic rigour. They may find that the school scores highly not because of high-performing, inspiring teachers, but because the school benefits from a population of students from professional families whose children are successful at school. In fact, the teachers there may be less kind, imaginative, or skilled than the teachers from the lower ranked school across town (Johnson & Brydon, 2012).

Parents who move school for class reasons may feel conflicted: they view themselves as democratic, inclusive, and liberal, but when faced with sending their child to a school with a low-income population, where the children score badly on the tests, they find that they just cannot accept that choice. Commonly, moving neighbourhoods is a game plan for the economically successful; others cannot easily afford packing up and moving just to negotiate school. Sometimes parents reject moving their child outside their neighbourhood because of the long commute, but also, more importantly, because they value having the school friends also be the neighbourhood friends.

When parents move house but leave the child attending the old neighbourhood school, the family faces a conundrum. The child has to endure long commutes and may have trouble connecting with the children in the new neighbourhood. Much work goes into keeping that child connected with the schoolmates in the old neighbourhood after school and on weekends, requiring ferrying of children back and forth. The parent may hope to protect the child from the discomfort of changing schools, but perhaps that is a mistake. Perhaps it would be best for the family to bite the bullet and suffer the change to avoid the ongoing trouble of commuting to the old neighbourhood.

Some parents do not move house physically but instead move the child to a school outside their neighbourhood school’s catchment. The school board has no problem with this practice, so long as the school in question is not at capacity. On the other hand, if that school is
at capacity and the parent claims to live in the school district falsely by reporting as his own the address of a friend or relative, that parent faces an ethical issue. His lie may result in another child, who has a right to attend that school, losing her place there. That other student may then need to travel to the next nearest school.

The strategy of moving neighbourhoods has its goals, often with its unintended effects. Negotiating school is never simple.
Strategy 4: Using Other Publicly Funded Schooling Options

Overview. Public alternative schools that diverge from the usual school programme are common in the Toronto District School Board. Magnet schools, which cater to a particular student interest or demographic, are available in the TDSB and the TCDSB.

Strategy 4a: Public Alternative Schools

The concept. Public alternative schools “offer alternatives to traditional educational concepts and practices, e.g. student-initiated learning process, enquiry-discovery approach, and shared problem-solving and decision-making” (Page, Thomas, & Marshall, 1977). Like community schools, they value parental involvement. They include both elementary and secondary panels. They served as the public school system’s response to the freer, less structured, private schools that had sprung up in the late sixties and early seventies. The Toronto Catholic District School Board has none.

Related narratives. Lara, Robert, and I met at LAS. We appreciated that school for its informality, its welcoming of parents, and the ease with which Liam was able to make new friends. Robert’s children continued there right through to Grade 6, though his oldest was very happy to leave. Both Lara and I withdrew our children because of difficulties with teachers in our second year there. We investigated other alternative school options but found them lacking. After many years of homeschooling, Lara’s daughters later enrolled in two different secondary alternative schools.

For Grades 7 and 8 Allan’s son attended a public alternative school, which followed the project method, with child-centred education and group-based learning. Allan called that school “the best ever.”

My remaining four participants never used the public alternative school strategy.

Discussion and analysis. Some well-functioning alternative schools have a clear, coherent philosophy where children really thrive and become self-directed learners (Barr & Parrett, 1997). The enterprise, or project, method is a big factor in their successes. Collaborative and discovery learning play a large role. These schools draw staff members who are passionately committed to alternative education. They like the progressive philosophy and working with the parent community.

Grade 7/8 schools in Toronto, such as East and Alpha, received wonderful reviews from parents I knew from the LAS community whose children had progressed to Grade 7 and 8. They
called them effective, organized, and exciting. Parents from primary/junior schools like LAS worked hard to have their children attend there.

Alternative schools may attract students who were unsuccessful at regular school or have special needs. These schools may become an escape option for parents who want to avoid addressing their child’s special needs and wish to circumvent a special education designation. This ploy can play havoc with the attempts of the school to provide a setting where everyone conducts themselves well.

Despite the fact that many families value alternative schools highly, some are dysfunctional, as was LAS when we experienced it. The teachers had little control, the parents constantly interfered, and some students were highly disruptive. Classroom management was a serious deficit, which research shows results in lower academic achievement, a stressful environment, and increasing aggressive behaviour (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000; Evertson & Weinstein, 2011; Oliver, Wehby, & Daniel, 2011).

Some of these schools may attract low-performing teachers that like the lack of supervision and accountability. Despite the faults in pedagogy, teacher professionalism, and transmitting well-organized subject matter, even the dysfunctional alternative school manages to encourage a wonderful bonding between families that I found uncommon in the regular public school, St. Demetrius.

In certain community alternative schools, a parent may bring a preschool child to their school-age child’s class. Such a practise prevents the abrupt dichotomy between home and school when the older child enters JK and leaves the younger behind. Some 3-year-olds welcome this step into the world of school and one can see how sitting in on your sister’s kindergarten can act as a head start at school.

Many parents seek out and appreciate the alternative school. However, the participants in this study had serious concerns about one such school.

**Strategy 4b: Magnet Schools**

**The concept.** Magnet schools are “specialized public schools that usually focus on a particular area of study” or “a particular philosophy of learning, such as back-to-basics or multicultural education” (McBrien & Brandt, 1997). When a school has a particular focus, such as the arts, students are drawn to it regardless of its geographic location. Due to a strong attraction for a particular subject area or philosophy of learning, parents are willing to have their child travel, or even board to attend such a school.
Besides the arts, magnet schools may focus on science, media, sports, outdoor education, international baccalaureate, or single-gender education. Often magnet schools have entrance requirements, auditions, and waiting lists. There are also magnet schools that are focused on schooling students of certain ethnicities, such as Afro-centric schools or First Nations schools. Magnet schools are generally secondary, not elementary.

**Related narratives.** When we consider single-gender schools as magnet schools, many participants, their spouses, and their children attended them, including Michelangelo, Maria, Lara, Alexandra, Jamie, Veronica, Liam, and myself.

Michelangelo’s choir school had its focus on music, while Jeffrey attended an arts-based secondary school. Although private, Len’s football school had the main feature of a magnet school, a focus that drew in the student.

**Discussion and analysis.** Magnet schools offer what many researchers from my sixties literature recommend: curriculum that interests the child (Holt, 1964; Miller, 2002; Neill, 1960). For students averse to school, having just one or two engaging subjects can have a spill-over effect: the student may then also enjoy school’s compulsory subjects as well. Having like-minded students and staff who share the student’s passion can sometimes make the routine subjects more palatable (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014; Fletcher, n.d.).

Single-gender schools draw in students because of their milieu, not necessarily the subject matter. Traditionally, parents sought these out in order to encourage concentration on academics rather than the interplay with the opposite sex. Parents believed that students often benefited from having time to understand and identify themselves as males or females. Being given time to mature and gain self-confidence before engaging with the opposite sex was also considered a benefit (Bigler, Hayes, & Liben, 2014).

In exploring magnet schools I realize that, metaphorically, every school (especially a secondary school) can show characteristics of a magnet school. This is so because the enthusiasm, skill, and drive of the teachers of a particular department may make one school attractive for a certain subject, such as theatre. In another school a physical education department may make that school famous for football. A third school may be outstanding for its music programme. Thus, without being designated so by the school board, the particular culture that evolves in a school creates a focus that, by reputation and word of mouth, draws in interested students. Sometimes these naturally-evolving features of a school exist primarily in their extracurricular activities, such as an after-school robotics club or debate team. Of course,
these informal magnet schools can only take in students from outside their boundaries when not at capacity.

In this study one student spent years in a magnet school, focused on one subject, music, but discarded it completely after leaving that place. Was the entire project simply the product of the parents’ vicarious desire? Did all that time and activity inform him that it was not his passion? Perhaps a student might be very talented in a field but not particularly like it. On the other hand, that individual might just need a break from the subject and may take it up later.

This study shows how a magnet school can engage a student who is disaffected by the school’s “routine activities such as attending classes, submitting required work, and following teachers’ directions in class,” (Fletcher, n.d., p. 1). Magnet schools have the capacity to make institutional learning more inviting to students.
Strategy 5: Navigating Special Education

Overview: When the child receives a special education designation, few parents can avoid school negotiating. The field can be divided into programming for those who have learning difficulties that need remediation and those that need enrichment (the gifted and the talented).

Strategy 5a: Special Education for Remediation

The concept. Special education serves individual learning needs that cannot be addressed by the regular classroom program. This strategy I reserve for students who display exceptionalities that one could consider limitations. (I will discuss the gifted exceptionality in the next strategy.) In Ontario, these exceptionalities are separated into five main categories: behaviour, comprising compulsive reactions and oppositional attitudes; communication, which includes autism, language impairment, or hard-of-hearing; intellectual, composed of developmental and intellectual disabilities (but also giftedness); physical, including blindness, low-vision, and other physical limitations; and finally the category of multiple exceptionalities, that include two or more of the previous categories (Ministry of Education, 2001).

A child becomes a special education student when identified as exceptional by an Identification Placement Review Committee. A range of five different placement options exists, including placement in a regular class with indirect support, where the teacher receives specialized consultative services; a regular class where the student receives specialized instruction within the regular classroom; a regular class with withdrawal for less than 50 per cent of the school day to receive instruction from a qualified special education teacher; a special education class with partial integration in a regular class; or a full-time special education class.

Once a child receives a special education referral, parents usually want to have a voice and negotiate school. First they attend the IPRC meeting. Often they communicate closely with the regular and special education teacher. Parents of those with special needs may join organizations that advocate on their behalf, for example, the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO), which provides “leadership in learning disabilities advocacy, research, education and services” (LDAO, 2014). Due to backlogs, parents of children having difficulties often lobby to get them assessed. On the other hand, some parents try to prevent an assessment or dispute one with which they disagree.

Treatment centres sometimes deliver special education. The Minister of Education allows a school board to “conduct an education program in a centre, facility, home, hospital, or
institution” (Government of Ontario, 1992). Admission occurs when parents apply on their own on behalf of their child’s or family’s needs. These centres combine teachers with doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and youth workers. As part of the admission criteria, parents are expected to involve themselves in the child’s treatment.

**Related narratives.** In this study some participants used special education, while others deliberately avoided it.

Although Veronica was a special education consultant, for our child’s Grade 2 we declined any special education for his reading and, in Grade 3, we turned down the offer of a scribe to help with the EQAO test writing. In LAS we witnessed parents of autistic and behavioural children who rejected identification, much to the detriment of classroom management.

Allan dismissed the idea of special education for Len by simply stating that he was “not a school kid.”

Mario, of course, needed special education for his learning disability, but such service was not readily available for him when he was a child.

Lara’s son, Calvin, was identified as autistic and her youngest daughter Caroline has been identified as learning disabled.

Jennifer sent Sean to an Arrowsmith school for his dyslexia.

Jamie had a learning disability but also attended a treatment centre for his behaviour.

Anna and Robert never dealt with special education.

**Discussion and analysis.** When the question of special education arises, negotiating school becomes a priority that most parents cannot avoid. Parents may fear that special education professionals are “not attuned to the real needs and feelings of children with disabilities and their families” (Brantlinger, 2013, p. vii). The issue of special education may drive parents to learn about their child’s special needs, resist or campaign for admission to a program, or push for some adjustments that they feel will better suit the child. Once identified, parents might lobby for programming that they believe addresses their child’s needs or that they approve of, such as the Arrowsmith class funded by the TCDSB (Arrowsmith-Young, B., 2012).

The treatment centres discussed in this study concerned only behaviour. Treatment centres, because of the intensity of their programs, require the consent and involvement of the parents. These centres usually practise family systems therapy, which assumes that the child is not the sole author of his troubles, and other family members (especially parents) play a role as well.
Although special education offers targeted programs to match exceptionalities, it also creates a problem: no matter how much teachers of special education try to deliver services unobtrusively, for example, through integration with the child staying in the regular classroom and the special education teacher going there, the special education student can still feel labeled as both different and less than. The tension between wanting the child to receive focused instruction to remedy academic deficits and the wish that she not be singled out burdens many parents (and teachers as well). Parents often fear the stigma of the special education label.

Without parental consent it is very difficult for the school to provide a child a special education program. A school board would have to make an appeal to the Ontario Special Education Tribunal. Veronica remarked that the TCDSB had never taken that step (Personal communication, August 17, 2014). School negotiators sometimes have to negotiate with principals, teachers, and consultants not simply to enrol the child in special education, but to prevent it. Sometimes a parent can have an insight that special education would be a mistake for her child. When the opinion is correct and she can communicate it effectively to the teacher and principal, then a potential affront to the child’s dignity can be avoided (Brantlinger, 2013).

When parents of children with behavioural difficulties fail to consent, they can cause a disturbance that affects a classroom or even a whole school, as several participants experienced at LAS. Parental rejection of special education for students with behaviour disorders can turn the parents of the general population of the school into school negotiators. They may complain, protest, or even withdraw their children from the school.

We can understand the importance of special education when we consider the stories of one of my participants who, when he was a child, needed special education for various problems which he referred to as dyslexia and ADD. Because these exceptionalities were not treated in childhood, they persisted and plagued him throughout his life. When the system fails, sometimes the student manages to cobble together help through his own resourcefulness, willpower, or sheer luck, but that is not guaranteed.

Sometimes a homeschooling parent will have the opinion that she can understand and deal with the range of needs of her exceptional child better than the school. That theory may be reasonable and work out, but if there is a collapse of finances and she can no longer afford to stay at home with the child, she then faces an emergency. She must surrender her homeschooling values and quickly seek out an appropriate placement in the public or Catholic education system. The problem is that identification and placement in a special education program takes time, often months.
In a well-run public or Catholic school, the school provides informal help to students who are not formally identified. Even if the students are not two grade levels behind (the usual criteria for launching a special education recommendation), special education teachers can still provide some remedial help without a formal special education designation.

Sometimes school negotiating parents have to negotiate with their own image of their child, particularly when the child is learning disabled. They need to reflect, study, and research that disability in order to understand their child. Lack of knowledge might lead to judging the child, deeming him lazy, bad, or stupid, when reading more on the diagnosis might help them accommodate his disability. The parents might comfort themselves by realizing that despite the learning disability in one cognitive area, their child might be extremely intelligent in others.

As I learned from Alexandra’s story, special education can be political, especially when behaviour issues arise. In schools in affluent neighbourhoods, not much misbehaviour is tolerated from any one student. The parents of other children start complaining. This may lead to strong and immediate intervention by staff, which can lead to remediation or a behavioural identification. That in turn leads to placement in a behavioural program. From my experience as an educational consultant serving 50 schools from affluent Willowdale to the troubled Jane and Finch Corridor, I know that in some schools staff are accustomed to such misbehaviour. Regular staff deal with them without massive special education involvement. Who is better off, the child in the school whose misbehaviour is handled locally, or the child in the school who gets referred to a behavioural program in a treatment centre?

In some instances, a child with behavioural problems has an effect on his peers as a group. The misbehaving child may do a service for the group by expressing the group’s discontent with the discipline and control that teachers impose (Foucault, 1977). When that child reduces his acting up, the group may pressure him to resume his former role (Brantley et al., 1996).

With issues such as getting an assessment or avoiding a special education designation and the ongoing reviewing of progress, the vast majority of parents feel compelled to be more active in their child’s schooling. Parents of children in regular classrooms may well practise zero school negotiation, whereas the special education issue virtually compels parents to become involved (as in Alexandra’s story).
Strategy 5b: Special Education for Enrichment (Gifted)

The concept. Those students who are designated gifted traditionally receive their designation after having an ability test. On this test successful candidates typically score in the ninety-eighth percentile or above. Those who qualify are considered gifted (McBrien, 1997). Another definition includes “students who are deemed to have other kinds of potential or who evince talent in such areas as leadership or the visual and performing arts” (Ravitch, 2007, p.104), but this strategy confines itself to those formally designated gifted through ability and IQ tests.

Related narratives. We chose not to pursue a gifted designation for Liam because we considered the TCDSB program flawed and because Liam needed to focus on the regular school program given his frequent illnesses and absences.

Ella quit gifted class because she resented having to catch up on the regular school work she missed while in gifted class. Also, the children at the school where the gifted class was held were hostile to the gifted students. Finally, the gifted teacher she liked transferred away.

Paul was offered a placement in a gifted class, however Anna and Stephen declined. They considered the school that the class was held in unsafe.

Similarly, 12-year-old Lara hated her gifted class. She had to leave her friends in her home school, associate with “snobbish kids,” and deal with the hostility of the non-gifted.

Len’s acceptance at football school and Michelangelo’s acceptance at a choir school show that they were each individually talented, but this did not equal a formal gifted designation.

Discussion and analysis. The gifted designation seems like a paradox. It appears to be a prize, but may turn out to be a detriment.

This study shows that the gifted designation comes with advantages and disadvantages. It can certainly be flattering to parents to have their child deemed gifted, and the learning experiences in the gifted class usually are more engaging and stimulating than those in the regular classrooms.

When the results of the tests for giftedness came out at St. Demetrius, two mothers sought out Veronica’s advice. One was boastful that her son had succeeded and the other, whose son came close, considered appealing. Veronica and I did consider appealing, but then we thought more deeply about it and concluded that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages.

One has to keep in mind that every ability test is a snapshot of where a child is at that particular time. Mood and context are factors (Gardner, 1985; Wechsler, 2004). In this study one
participant who was designated gifted by the school board failed to pass an entrance exam into an elite private school. Another accepted as gifted in the TCDSB was not recognized as gifted in the TDSB. This incongruence can be upsetting.

Gifted programs cause other concerns. A board, such as the TCDSB, that withdraws students to a gifted program one day a week has to resolve the problem of the regular teacher making him catch up on the work assigned in the home room. This double duty can be seen as a punishment to the gifted, certainly an irritant. Renzulli’s concept of “compacting the curriculum” would alleviate this strain (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). For parents, having their child withdrawn to a distant school may lead to some anxiety, especially if the school in question happens to be in a rougher neighbourhood (which caused one of my participants to decline the offer of a gifted placement for her son). Placement in a gifted class can also cause the gifted child to suffer a backlash from students outside the gifted program both in the home school and in the school hosting the gifted students. The other students may resent what they see as preferential treatment that the gifted students receive. In contrast to the findings of Peters & Bain, who saw that there were no higher rates of victimization for the gifted, this study shows a friction with peers caused by the gifted placement (2011). In this study, tensions with peers caused one student to drop out of the gifted program while another was able to endure the discomfort.

The students themselves may react to being taken away from friends and their home school. This may lead to rebellion against the program.

As we attempt to enrich the child intellectually, we may overlook the curriculum of friendship, the child’s social life. While the gifted designation may be a source of great pride for some students, and they may thrive being with their intellectual peers, for others it may be more trouble than it is worth.
Strategy 6: Becoming Involved With the School

Overview: This study uncovered three ways parents can become involved with the school. Close communication implies interacting with the staff on a regular, ongoing basis, either verbally or in writing. Volunteering consists of working for the school for free to help out, but also to build rapport and influence. Advocacy involves stepping in to affect change, often due to a crisis, or because of some disagreement with the school’s administration or teaching staff, or even other members of the parent community.

Strategy 6a: Close Communication

The concept. Unlike the zero school negotiator, who trusts the school to do the right thing, the close communicator stays connected. She attends all reporting sessions, open houses, and school meetings. She communicates with the teacher through homework books, telephone calls, emails, notes, or visits regarding any and every concern about her child. She maintains a visible presence in the school when work life allows it. She drops her children off and picks them up, sometimes leaning into the classroom for a chance to chat with the teacher. The successful close communicator monitors the child’s happiness and progress by maintaining contact with the school’s staff.

The close communicator avoids being labelled a “crank” by being friendly, courteous, and pleasant. Some zealous parents can irritate teachers, perhaps causing the staff to avoid them. Some teachers say that such parents waste the school’s time, have an axe to grind, or insinuate that teachers are stupid or malicious. Good close communicators, like successful salespeople, are constantly winning people over to their side.

During more tense negotiations with a teacher, however, the close communicator may decide to involve the school principal. If communications break down, she will call in the superintendent or trustee. This is where the school negotiator can morph from communicator to advocate. Herein lies the difference between the two strategies: close communicators maintain bonds with the staff to prevent trouble for their children; advocates go to battle when trouble arises.

Related narratives. Close communication resulted in Liam and I trying out St. Demetrius for the last couple of weeks of Grade 1, agreement from the principal that we decline special help for Liam’s reading in Grade 2, and Liam being placed in the Grade 6/7 class rather than the Grade 5/6 class for his Grade 6 year. In secondary school, because of Liam’s frequent illnesses, much communication was necessary.
Anna, once she had negotiated the right to attend Paul’s kindergarten classes, and the partial homeschooling arrangement, mainly avoided close communication.

Lara was the classroom co-ordinator for the parent-teacher meetings of the kindergarten classes, facilitating communications. When Marion joined Grade 5 at St. Demetrius, her teacher and Lara communicated frequently about Marion’s adapting to regular school. She felt frustrated by the Grade 6 teacher and therefore withdrew Marion from the school.

Jennifer, in her free school, as a school founder, communicated with the staff and the other parents, but to no avail. She could not affect change, and so she left.

Mario kept in touch with teachers and principals, but his narrative exemplifies mainly advocacy. Allan, Robert, and Alexandra did not practice close communication.

**Discussion and analysis.** In my view, successful close communication is the most important strategy of school negotiation. Parents and teachers sometimes feel a rapport, making communications easy. In successful communication I see the child, parent, and teacher all reading from the same playbook. The literature suggests that “the quality of these links influences children’s and adolescents’ school success,” (Booth, A. & Dunn, 2013, p. 3) that parents want this involvement, and that “teachers also want more contact with parents” (p. 3).

To communicate successfully, parents need to know what is going on. The child will tell of the most egregious events, such as a teacher punishing a student by ordering push-ups in the snow, but whole swaths of school life go unreported. To garner this information, parents will drop things off in the class or pick up their children at the classroom door. Other parents will drop in after school and talk informally with the teacher. These visits provide parents an opportunity to observe classroom life. Of course this practice can get out of hand, leading to push back by the staff so that no parent can reach the classroom door without a very good reason, given in writing, and wearing a visitor’s identity card.

Many parents may be averse to close communication. Some parents are just too busy to carry out the time-consuming process of establishing rapport. Other parents, as with Anna’s story, may have the right to special accommodations but worry about losing them because they are unaware of their rights. Parents may also suppress their own concerns because they are afraid of retribution such as being asked to leave a private school. Others will hold their tongue because they feel that other parents have been unfair to teachers.

Some parents want to be treated as clients or customers, as did Alexandra’s husband Don. Is the customer not always right? Surely the parent-client deserves some influence on classroom life. But how can the classroom include parents’ and students’ voices? Some
teachers, like captains of ships, do not take votes. They have the power, and they go where they
decide. Others find ways to collaborate.

Many fear that close communications can become tense, and prefer to avoid conflict. They will leave situations that might lead to conflict rather than try to communicate their feelings about them. Even if teachers are behaving unprofessionally, some parents lack the courage or ability to communicate their concerns.

Parents communicate with teachers in all kinds of ways beyond the face-to-face. They use notes, telephone calls, and sometimes schools provide little notebooks for such purposes. Most recently the teacher’s email is available so that parents can reach teachers right in their own homes at any time, day or night. (Teacher unions attempting to protect their members often discourage sharing email addresses.)

In the alternative free school in this study, there is an expectation, not well defined in any literature, of democratic decision making. Can the child, the parents, principal, and teachers collaborate, make a plan, and then let the teacher implement it? Lakeshore Alternative School taught us that, as one of my participants puts it, “cranks, time wasters, and parent bullies can take over.” That forces school principals and school councils to devise policies of non-interference. Unfortunately, that can lead back to where we started, with the professionals in charge and the parents silenced. Policies of non-interference have to allow for some disagreement. If feedback consists only of agreement, parent views are superfluous. They change nothing. They only reinforce what already exists (Watzlawick, P. 1967; Doyle & Straus, 1976).

Parents who are also teachers have advantages in building rapport with and asking favours from teachers and administrators. A school negotiator might have some hope that this rapport can translate into influencing a teacher’s practice or a school’s culture. That hope often turns out to be in vain; schools usually resist such interference even if it comes from a fellow educator. And sometimes the school negotiator thinks that he can make helpful suggestions to a new school principal, but the principal pushes back, finds the overture uncomfortable, and declines to participate.

When giving feedback in situations where you want the school to change course, close communication is important. In situations where you have to protect your child from what you deem to be abusive, close communication can turn to advocacy.
Strategy 6b: Parental Voluntarism

The concept. A volunteer offers to serve or work without expecting payment. With too little time for teachers to do it all, parent volunteers are helpful. Schools in affluent neighbourhoods have an army of volunteers, while schools where parents are too busy making a living have few. In a high-income family, one parent may do all of the money-earning, while the other has time free for volunteering.

Many parents volunteer out of generosity. When asked, they come. Such selfless volunteers spend hours in school without making any requests for the benefit of their own children. School negotiating parents are not as selfless. They have a vested interest in volunteering. They want to have a presence in the school, to build relationships with teachers and principals, and to have influence over the school’s direction. They do favours for the school, so that when they need a favour, they can call it in. They wish to observe school to watch over their children, to advocate for services and polices that suit their children. They aim to meet other parents and build community for their children that extends beyond school hours.

As protectors, the school negotiating parent shows presence. The staff, the child, and the other children sense her presence. Children feel safer when aware of their parents’ nearness. And, if they complain about school, the parent knows what they are talking about.

Related narratives. At LAS I volunteered in the classroom every day and served on the school’s advisory committee. At St. Demetrios, I volunteered for special events in the classroom and for field trips, supervised the yard, and became active in the Catholic School Advisory Committee. I became a one-person playground committee, argued unsuccessfully to locate a new playground structure outside the primary boys’ soccer area, and researched and presented a proposal for gaining charitable status for CSAC. To solve the problem of shortage of staff to supervise the yard, I proposed that we cut the number from two to one. After three years, much of it frustrating, I decided my term was over.

Anna volunteered in Paul’s JK class, but her mission was to watch over Paul, and not so much to help with the other children.

Robert volunteered at the JK/SK class at LAS, and Susan served as the treasurer of the school advisory committee.

Lara volunteered at LAS by co-ordinating parent-teacher meetings. These often tense meetings dissuaded her from volunteering in the future.

Jennifer gave hours of service to founding her free school. Unfortunately, that school disappointed.
**Discussion and analysis.** Volunteering is a way for school negotiators to stay close to their child and have more of a presence in the school without seeming to meddle. Once you become a volunteer in a school, you join one of its inner circles.

Helping teachers supervise students in the classroom, the school yard, and on class trips, can give a parent a unique vantage on how their child acts in school and how teachers treat the children. In my experience, meeting with and talking to other parents in a volunteer situation allowed me to evaluate the school and find out what the parents supported and what they wanted changed. The conversations volunteers have can provide insights into the classroom, the school, or the happiness of the children. Such insights are invaluable to parents who want their children to feel at home within a well-run school.

Supervising the yard earns the school negotiator major credit with the principal. Teachers and teacher assistants have their supervision time limited by their contracts. If that leads to a time slot not covered, the principal has to fill in. The principal could better use this time for school administration, a higher-level set of thinking skills more appropriate to the principal’s pay grade. The parent volunteer supervisor makes that time available, a tremendous favour. (Of course, the occasional yard supervision gives the principal an opportunity to mingle with the students in a less formal way.)

One of the most valuable services that volunteers can provide for a school is to raise money, which can buy resources and experiences that enrich educational programs. Fundraising committees on school advisory councils generate this money. In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the top 20 money-generating elementary schools generate $220,000 each on average (Winsa & Rushowy, 2011). Herein lies the advantage for schools in affluent neighbourhoods where the parents may find the time and professional skill to successfully raise large amounts. It seems unfair that the schools where high-income families attend gain extra funding, while schools without such parental support do not.

Annie Kidder of People For Education comments on this situation. The top fundraising schools each become “a private school in the public system” (Winsa and Rushowy, 2011). She understands that “it’s hard to resist as a parent, but it really undermines the overall ideal of public education.” (2011). It would be best if each school had equal access to funding. But in reality, as Annie Kidder puts it, poor students are at a “double disadvantage” (2011). This is because they not only suffer from limited resources at home, but at school as well.

The advice given by the School Advisory Council is simply advice: the principal has the decision-making power. The principal also controls the school budget, except for the monies
raised by the council. Providing incentive grants to teachers to do what the parents want, that is, deliver more enrichment to students through guest speakers and field trips, is the only instance I have encountered of parents having control where the principal did not. Skilful principals will usually listen to and follow sensible advice from the council, but only in the instance of fundraising do they have to.

When one volunteers to join an organization such as the CSAC, one gets involved in the school’s politics. Some groups want certain things while others oppose them. Emotions boil over, feelings get hurt, and sometimes people react unwisely. The dissenting voice may be ignored by the majority, even if that opinion later proves to be the most sound (Prince, 2012). For the frustrated volunteer, the happiest decision may be to quit serving on the school council.

From my CSAC story I conclude that the parents who form a School Advisory Council need more instruction in the processes of collaborative decision making, such as those found in Making Meetings Work (Doyle & Straus, 1976). Active listening, valuing dissenting opinion, and building consensus are skills needing direct teaching.

Sometimes when a parent enrolls his child in a particular alternative community school, volunteering is expected. Some feel uncomfortable with that and contribute in others ways, such as by donating money or sending in a proxy.

Assisting in the classroom allows teachers to give more attention to students who need it, but not many teachers welcome volunteers on a regular basis. (One-off events such as a school trip are fine.) In my teaching career, I often heard colleagues remark that parent volunteers could be difficult, critical, or interfering. In this study, the few interfering, destructive parents at LAS demonstrated this point. Clandinin and Connelly’s use of the terms “secret stories” and “cover stories” is helpful to the problem of volunteers (1995). When teachers have private conversations with other trusted teachers, they may tell secret stories (honest, direct, unvarnished recountings of events in their teaching practice). But when teachers speak to lay persons, they may use cover stories in which they are always competent, expert, and professional. Parent volunteers in the classroom may overhear the secret stories and gossip. Most teachers will not want to risk that. Other researchers write about these concepts of secret stories and cover stories (Crites, 1971; Olson, M. R. & Craig, C. J., 2005; Barrett, M. S. & Stauffer, S. L., 2012).

By patient volunteering, one brick at a time, the school negotiating parent tries to construct her version of the once and future school.
Strategy 6c: Advocacy

The concept. Advocacy in education occurs when “a person assumes an active role in assisting or supporting a specific child and/or family or a cause on behalf of children and/or families . . . The advocate uses his or her power to meet client needs or to promote causes.” (Shafritz, Koeppe, & Soper, 1988) At times parents need the help of expert consultants and organizations but, in this study, advocacy refers to the work of a parent on behalf of her own child or the entire student body. Parents stand up for their children, teach them to assert themselves, and back them when they practise self-assertion. As Neill phrased it best, such adults are “on the side of the child” (1960). Despite years of educational reform (Olson, 2003), some schools, to a degree, can be abusive, neglectful, or at least intimidating for children and parents. Thuggish classmates and hostile peer groups present another daunting force. Leaving the child to face superior forces alone seems unfair.

Advocacy resembles close communication. Close communication, however, is a continuous, everyday practice, while advocacy involves standing up for the child when a crisis arises.

Related narratives. I spoke up for Liam when his Grade 3 teacher’s behaviour chart left him with zero stars, and when the teacher kept him in for every recess to finish his work. When Liam was accused of fighting and, we opposed the behaviour contract. When the principal scolded the entire school population in winter for a full recess, I spoke up. I helped lead the parent protest against the transfer of the Grade 2 teacher to Grade 7/8. My great failure as an advocate was not making a formal complaint about the bullying Liam endured in Grade 9. That likely would have ended it promptly.

Mario complained to the principal when Michelangelo was bullied and did the same for Ella. When Ella was in secondary school, he fought hard to get her physical education mark reassessed, but to no avail.

Anna fought fiercely against the forces behind Maria’s bullying, but that only seemed to make matters worse. For Paul’s Grade 12 year she withdrew him from an English course due to the teacher’s eccentric teaching.

Lara, while Calvin was receiving treatment for his autism, opposed the behavioural approaches suggested by a therapist. While she did not complain about Marion’s poor Grade 6 mathematics instruction, she protested by leaving the school.

When Jennifer was picked up by the ankles and called a “dumb bunny” complaining to her parents did not seem an option in those days “when school was always right.”
Jamie’s father, Don, successfully advocated for him when the French teacher refused to let him take a test. Don stepped in again when Jamie was forced to do push-ups in the snow.

**Discussion and analysis.** In this study three situations are apparent, the parents advocated and got what they wanted, the parents did not advocate and wished they had, or the parents advocated and wished that they had not.

We see from the narratives that children need the protection of their parents from instances of the abuse of school authority. (Smith, P. K., Singer, M., Hoel, H., & Cooper, C. L., 2003; Campbell, M. A. & Stenton, J., 2004; Cumming, R., 2011) In protecting her own child, sometimes one parent can initiate changes in the administration of the school that improve conditions for all the students. Sometimes changing a school policy, habit, or staff member exceeds the reach of an individual parent. Thirty parents, however, may have the necessary clout.

Some parents relish the battle and do quite well at it. They themselves may have had parents who advocated for them. In this study I found that coming to the child’s defence can send a powerful message to the child that he is worthy of just treatment.

School negotiators may forget or overlook the possibility of advocating for their child. Veronica and I, for example, never thought of seeking the help of the principal at that time when we wanted the JK teacher to accept Veronica as a helper in the classroom.

In two of my narratives, the child actually blocked the parents’ efforts to advocate. When being bullied by peers, the child might think that a complaint by the parent will make it worse or that the bullying will soon end if left to run its course. Protecting the child against bullying by teachers and principals may seem simple compared to the complexity of protecting the child against peer bullying (Unnever, J. D. & Cornell, D. G., 2004).

Teachers may try to block advocacy, which can throw parents into self-doubt and confusion. Sometimes parents do not advocate, but withdraw the child from a caustic school situation. Retreat, as a military strategy, has viability. So too can withdrawing the child be a wise maneuver.

When parents do not advocate, the child may assert herself by acting up, a cautionary tale for complacent parents. That student’s success at school may then decline (Purkey & Novak, 1996).

One of my participants had difficulty fitting in with her peers because of her perceived masculinity, as manifested in her dress and in her passion for playing hockey. David Carless comments on this issue in the world of school sport, saying, “Despite improvements in other
sections of society, continuing accounts of heterosexism and homophobia in sport suggest that the environment is still a difficult one” (p. 608). Adolescents need advocates while they try to negotiate this difficult and complex issue.

We parents model what the child will eventually practise on his own. At the end of the day, advocating parents want to work themselves out of a job. We want the child to assert himself. Manuals, such as *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* (Smith, 1975), have good lessons for both parents and children on self-assertion. Such an assertive young person possesses the skills to communicate with teachers, principals, and other students in a way that gives respect and expects respect in return.

Despite the difference in power between a student and a teacher, the student can question the teacher. If the student, for example, finds errors in the marking of an assignment or examination, then a correction is in order. An assertive student may find that a teacher has been treating him unfairly, and can ask for a meeting where he can give his side of the story and request fairer dealing.

Eventually our young person can not only advocate for herself, but stand up for others as well. Respectful, assertive communication by a young person is a credit to her parents who have practised the school negotiation strategy of advocacy.
Strategy 7: Attending Private Schools

Overview. Private schools are schools paid for entirely or in part by the tuition of the students. This strategy I divide into two categories: the traditional private school, with its focus on academics and tradition, and the progressive private school, which promotes active experiential learning and child-centred learning based on the child’s interests. Some of these are boarding schools, though most are not.

Strategy 7a: Traditional Private Schools

The concept. Private schools are schools “managed by an independent board of trustees or organization and sustained in whole or in part by the tuition of their students” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 172). Although quite independent, in Ontario these schools are inspected by the Ministry of Education. They can be further divided into progressive or traditional, non-profit or proprietary, sectarian and secular, and day school or boarding school (Our Kids Media, 2014).

Private schools, like magnet schools, often offer a feature, such as outdoor education, science, or military training. Families choose private schools that match their child’s interests or their family’s values. Often the child attends the traditional private school that the father or mother attended.

Traditional, as opposed to progressive education, supports “learning solely from books, lectures, recitation, and practice” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 174). As Dewey described, “The subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation” (1938, p. 17).

Related narratives. We considered sending Liam to a Catholic private school, but decided against it after hearing negative reports from friends who had placed their child in that school. Also, three colleagues who had worked in other private schools told us of their negative experiences as teachers working there.

Len went to a private football school that taught courses in a traditional manner.

Paul went to a traditional private school, Holy Trinity, but Anna regretted that choice because the instruction was so unimaginative.

Alexandra put Jamie in such a school for kindergarten, hoping the school would correct his rambunctious behaviour, but the school failed at that and asked him to leave.

Discussion and analysis. When you go through a catalogue of private schools, you find that a majority are traditional (Our Kids Media, 2014). My Catholic secondary school was
private. The private Catholic secondary schools before the extension of funding beyond Grade 8 were elitist. Using an entrance examination, they selected those students who were most successful at school and left out those who were less successful.

Clients of traditional private schools seek out schools that encourage respect for authority, wear uniforms, use organized subject matter, provide direct instruction, and focus on standards. They believe that the benefits to such education include “higher academic achievement, reduced dropout rates, and improved critical thinking skills” (Davis, 2011, p.34).

Parents make decisions based on their own experience of school. They may assume that schools have not changed since when they attended. School for them might have been free and easy, informal, and less focused on outcomes. It is ironic that some families in 2015 avoid the public school seeking something traditional, prescriptive, and serious, given that my experience suggests that the whole public system has undergone what Miller described as a “conservative revolution.” The freedom and informality of the schools of the late sixties, seventies, and eighties has diminished. One would expect most parents to seek a private, progressive school, since that is what the public system has moved away from (Miller, 2002).

Higher income families can take advantage of the private school option; low-income families require scholarships or bursaries to attend. Private schools can cost up to $56,440 per year with boarding, without any tax relief (Our Kids Media, 2014). Private school tuition is beyond the reach of most families. The private schools therefore segregate higher-income students from their lower-income neighbours. High-income parents may avoid the local school because they perceive potential harm from associating with students in schools where they think there exists poverty, violence, and social disturbance. The establishment can send its children to schools where they can associate with other students from their social class. Parents can provide for their children access to the same sort of networks that they enjoyed when they were in school (often at the same school).

A private school, with a focus, such as outdoor education, like a magnet school, can draw in students. The theme attracts them to the school and motivates them so that once they are in the school they will apply themselves to all the academics. The founders of a private school can offer a coherent mission statement that is difficult to achieve in a regular public school with its hodgepodge of agendas. Clarity of purpose can work to the private school’s advantage.

Most private schools offer a lower pupil-teacher ratio than public schools (Our Kids Media, 2014). Some are boarding schools, which might appeal to parents who travel or who believe boarding creates toughness and independence.
A myth surrounds traditional private schools: it claims that given standards and discipline, behaviour problems go away. A parent may expect a traditional private school, with its emphasis on authority, to provide a correction for a child who is acting out. But one cannot put a child in a suit and tie, sit him at a desk, and expect his inner turmoil to stop. In my experience, no amount of discipline from a school can help a child who needs therapy or special education.

The reports of my participants show that private schools have their own sets of problems, such as a guidance department that is markedly inferior to that of a well-run collegiate. In this study I discovered that, in one private school, Holy Trinity, the principal opposed parental involvement. He publicly announced that if any parents were not happy with any school practise, they were free to withdraw their child. The strategies of close communication and advocacy may be pre-empted entirely in such traditional private schools.

At private schools, parents are paying a fee for service and expect the provider to do their bidding. But in fact, private school can be a lot less accountable. In certain private schools, levels of authority that accept complaints may be absent. In the public system, if the principal dismisses your complaint, you can talk to the superintendent. After that, you have the director and the trustee. If all else fails, you complain to the Ministry of Education or the media. In some private schools a board oversees the headmaster. In others, the headmaster has few restraints. When a school is founded by a charismatic leader, with his own philosophy, that person becomes very powerful, which can lead to abuse. For example, in the Ka School at Therafields, the school’s founder slept with several underage girls (Goodbrand, 2010). In the public system, boards prevent personality cults attached to principals by term limits. In the TCDSB, the Board’s practice is to transfer principals every five years.

Attending a private school can lead to a long, time-consuming commute as well as an expensive tuition. These practical issues, distance and cost, can override pedagogical interests as they did Lara’s and my family. Unlike a public or Catholic school, available every few blocks, the private school you select may be located across the city. The school’s friendship group becomes difficult to access. Allan and Jennifer, however, made private school work.

Some private schools pay teachers less than in the public system, offering less security and benefits, which can lead to frequent staff turnover (Davies, Aurini, & Quirke, 2002). Teachers may choose to take a private school position because of a surplus of teachers for the public system and no work available for that year. Once the employment situation improves and they have gained experience in the private system, they may quit to take positions in the public
system, as happened with my friend Cathy leaving the Russian school, and in Jennifer’s story at White Birches. (While White Birches was a progressive private school, one could see this problem arising in a traditional private school as well.) In such a situation, finding a replacement who is a good match for the philosophy of the private school may be difficult and cause the students stress.

When parents choose a private school they do not always get what they want.

Strategy 7b: Progressive Private Schools

The concept. Ravitch defines progressive schools as schools that follow a “philosophy of education that promotes active, experiential learning,” and are “associated with child-centered education that is based on children’s interests and concerns” (Ravitch, 2007).

Like public alternative schools, progressive private schools draw families who find the regular schools too academic, compulsory, and authoritarian. I divide these progressive schools into two types: the Deweyan school with a good balance between following the child’s interest and respect for societal values, and the free school, which finds inspiration in A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School and Greenburg’s Sudbury Valley School.

My participants explored several iterations of these private schools, which I now describe. Sudbury Valley Schools have two main features: first, the students are empowered, given an equal vote with adults on the operation of the school; second, the program of studies is only about what interests the child, and going fishing is a perfectly acceptable educational activity. A Montessori school has qualities of “child-centered progressivism, but is far more strictly designed, structured, and orderly” (Ravitch, 2007). The Montessori method emphasizes fixed stages in growth, the manipulation of concrete materials, and the individualization of instruction (Smith, M. B., 1972). The Waldorf method is “based on co-educational, mixed-ability teaching with as much attention paid to the development of feeling and a sense of values . . . Specialization is delayed as long as possible and each child receives a broad education in the arts and sciences” (Rowntree, 1982, p. 298). Arrowsmith schools are schools developed to teach children with learning disabilities. Instead of teaching coping skills, Arrowsmith offers a program of cognitive exercises which claims to strengthen weak sections of the brain (Arrowsmith-Young, 2012).

Related narratives. Liam never attended a progressive private school. We considered five such schools. The Springfield and Waldorf schools came highly-recommended, but high tuition and a long commute deterred us. I wrote a prospectus for a school that Lara and I could
open, but by then she had committed to homeschooling. The Sudbury Valley School piqued my interest, but Liam needed a school one year before that school would open. At St. Demetrius some students left to go to the Self Expression School but Liam rejected that possibility.

Allan’s son Len attended Roosevelt school for Grade 4, 5, and 6, which served him well. Lara attended a progressive, private, Catholic secondary school, which was a good match for her.

Jennifer’s boys attended four different progressive schools. Sean attended a Montessori school for SK. Both boys attended the Sudbury Valley School, and afterwards Silver Birches. When Sean could not read, Jennifer moved him to the Arrowsmith school.

**Discussion and analysis.** A learner-centred school, whereby the teacher purports to be guided more by the needs and interests of the individual child than by the dictates of a syllabus or the demands of other members of society, has the power to rekindle engagement in a child disaffected by traditional public schooling (De La Ossa, 2005). Studies in student engagement show that “learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired, and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or otherwise ‘disengaged’” (Hidden Curriculum, 2014).

Many progressive private schools have teachers with a very high level of commitment, due to their belief in the school’s ideology. Examples of such schools would include Sudbury Valley, Montessori, and Waldorf. For example, Caitlin quit her job at a traditional academic private school and took a significant cut in pay to teach at Jennifer’s free school because she believed in its ideal of freedom. However, if principals cannot retain good staff who are compatible with the school’s philosophy, then the school’s warm, child-centred intentions go unfulfilled.

A certain private school may create a lovely, humane learning milieu, but repel prospective applicants because of its unorthodox philosophical underpinnings. A parent may find a certain progressive school’s philosophy very appealing (as did Lara when she investigated the Waldorf school for Marion) but later realize that it did not suit her child’s personality.

In progressive free schools, governed by democratic processes, conflict, lack of direction, and paralysis can occur. In such democratic schools, where the founders fully empower community members, the school can become the object of a takeover by participants who have a rival philosophy (as Jennifer experienced firsthand). I would argue that the seeds of the problems at South Etobicoke Free School can be found in the original Framingham School. Greenberg mentions that conflict was common at Framingham. A major tension existed because
of the conflicting goals of giving the children the freedom to choose what they study (if anything), and the goal of achieving an impressive body of work to justify their graduation (Greenberg, 1992; 1995).

Progressive private schools share many of the problems of traditional private schools simply by being private schools: commuting distances, the high costs of tuition, unexpected school closures, teachers transferring out in the middle of a school year, and difficulty recruiting the best teachers who would prefer to work in the public sector. If a private school teacher quits in the middle of the year, finding a replacement who is a good match for the philosophy of the private school may be difficult and cause the students stress.

Many parents have the impression that, if they could afford it, private schools would certainly be superior to the public schools. In this study, I found that the reverse can be true when you look carefully at some of the problems that both traditional and progressive private schools present.
Strategy 8: Homeschooling

Overview. This strategy involves schooling that is home-focused rather than institution-focused. The least radical is distance education, where, currently, the student takes Ministry-designed courses online in order to pursue secondary school credits. Timesharing between homeschooling and attending regular school combines education in the family with institutional schooling. Schooling at home uses parent instruction, organized subject matter, and structure, with the goal of keeping up with the Ministry’s expectations, whereas unschooling follows the child’s interests, giving her the complete freedom to choose what she will study, when, and how.

Strategy 8a: Distance Learning

The concept. Ravitch defines distance learning as “the use of technology, especially television and computers, to offer classes in locations other than those where teachers present the lessons” (2007, p.77). Renowned universities, such as Harvard and MIT, offer free online courses, available worldwide, through a program called edX (edX, 2014). Students enrol online and choose from an expanding list of courses, with successful completion leading to a certificate of achievement. Surprisingly, these certificates may also be recognized by other colleges or universities, but that decision is up to each individual institute.

Distance learning programs can be divided into two types, the synchronous and the asynchronous (Hrastinski, 2008). In synchronous courses students are expected to show up online at a particular time to receive a lesson, participate in a discussion, or write a test. These courses create a virtual classroom but, unlike classrooms in brick and mortar schools, students and teachers typically do not have to travel to a specific physical location. However, in the asynchronous category, the teacher has a peripheral role, acting more as tutor and evaluator. She does not transmit the subject matter in a live presentation, as she would in a classroom or synchronous setting, rather she posts it on the Internet for students to retrieve. The students have the freedom to access the learning materials whenever they want; they are not tied to a class schedule (Hrastinski, 2008). In both situations students are expected to complete their final tests at a specified location.

In Ontario, secondary school credits can be earned through the Independent Learning Centre (ILC), which has features of the asynchronous method of delivery (ILC, 2014). The ILC has been operating since 1926 when courses were mediated by regular mail, and were called correspondence courses. Now students take these distance courses over the Internet. They can
take courses irrespective of the school year calendar. Course work and materials are provided, and teachers offer the learners help with the lessons. For the final test, the student must attend an ILC centre.

Distance learning courses can serve as a mechanism for delivering subject matter to homeschoolers when they are of secondary school age. They provide a compromise for school negotiators who want their children to stay out of institutional learning and yet pass standard courses and receive proper accreditation.

**Related narratives.** Veronica has taught distance learning courses. Although Liam never took a distance education course, his long absences required us to use methods analogous to distance learning such as emails, phone calls, and delivering learning materials back and forth from the school. Liam’s friend Owen took civics through distance learning in the summer to free up time for hockey in the winter. And Sally, a friend and former student, took Grade 11, 12, and 13 from home to avoid the social scene of high school and to take care of her mother.

Allan taught e-courses.

Lara took several courses online in order to advance her BA while working full-time.

**Discussion and analysis.** For the secondary and post-secondary students who wish to stay at home or avoid school, distance learning advances their formal education. Academic and career goals progress despite non-attendance in an institution. Even if they spend no time in a school building, their transcripts look the same as any other student’s. Shy individuals can avoid the school social scene, as can the rebellious or unsociable student.

Homeschoolers gain from distance learning organized subject matter and accreditation. As stated on the ILC website, “the credits [earned] are the same as those earned at any secondary school in Ontario” (ILC, 2014). The learning packages ensure that the outcomes of the Ministry are met. Distance education removes the possibility for school violence, bullying, and even catching germs. Homeschooling parents can continue to “own” the child through the adolescent years since the family now has access to professionally developed courses.

The student who takes elearning full time cuts off the social interaction completely to focus solely on the school subject matter alone. To use Schwab’s commonplaces of curriculum, the social milieu vanishes entirely, what predominates is the learner and the subject matter (1978). The teacher steps back into the role of tutor and evaluator.

Students can combine some distance learning with regular school attendance to access courses not offered in the local school, covering a gap in the syllabus. They allow for students to
take courses in the summer without needing to physically attend a class during hours when they would rather be outside.

Distance learning has some disadvantages. Since the student is not in a real classroom, it may fail to engage him and seem less important than standard classes, causing the student to lose focus and fall behind. Students who lack computer and Internet skills may find it more difficult than regular classes. Some students who have never experienced structured subject matter, such as unschoolers, may find distance learning too difficult; they have to adapt to a learning package, some kind of schedule, and formal evaluations. Students lacking self-direction may fail at distance learning. They may need classroom structure and a skilled teacher. As Moore and Kearsley write, “Students with poor study or time-management skills, or poor communication skills, will usually have trouble with distance learning” (2011, p. 168). Highly successful distance learners are independent, self-directed, and responsible. Success in distance learning strongly depends on the abilities of the student.

I believe parents need to reflect carefully on distance learning because they are choosing an education for their child that may rule out a significant opportunity to develop social skills and make friends. Before opting for distance learning, families should ensure that the children who need social interaction get it. A sociable teen, working alone, with no peer interaction in the learning milieu, will not appreciate distance learning. For some, however, distance learning is exactly what the student needs at a particular time in his life.

**Strategy 8b: Timesharing between Homeschooling and Institutional Schooling**

**The concept.** For the purposes of this study I use the term timesharing to describe the dividing of a child’s time between institutional schooling and homeschooling. Homeschooling involves the “education of students at home rather than in a public or private school” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 116). Parents make the decision to teach the children at home in order to “keep them from exposure to what they consider to be the corrupting influences within schools, such as the availability of drugs or alcohol, sexual permissiveness among peers, or challenges to religious beliefs” (p. 116). I would add that intensive parents (Aurini and Davies, 2005) choose homeschooling from an aversion to the corrosive effects of school as an educational medium (Gatto, 2002). Institutional schooling, however, means “age-specific, organized learning” (Collins & O’Brien, 2011, p. 414). The institution groups students in a central location for learning under the supervision of teachers.
Logically, timesharing can be divided into two methods of sharing time. For the first, the consecutive approach, the child attends school full-time for part of the year, and homeschools for the rest of the year. A family might take a child out of school for a term, to travel the world and homeschool during that voyage. For the second, the concurrent approach, the child takes certain subjects at school regularly throughout the year. Every week, or even every day, the child has one foot in the institutional school and one in the home school. Timesharing concerns mainly the elementary school child. The secondary school student may stay home all the time while accessing institutional learning through distance learning.

**Related narratives.** During Liam’s Grade 1 year, we had two instances of consecutive timesharing. We spent the first two weeks in LAS, which taught us that we should leave it, and the last two weeks of that year at St. Demetrius, which convinced us to return there.

Similarly, Marion attended St. Demetrius for the last two months of Grade 5 and had a positive experience. However, when attending the first two months of Grade 6 she had a terrible time there and returned to homeschooling.

Anna practised concurrent homeschooling from Paul’s Grade 1 through to Grade 4. She taught Paul the core subjects while taking him to school for specialized subjects. Anna considered this combination of home and institutional schooling ideal.

**Discussion and analysis.** When the child shares learning time between the home and the school, families can have the best of both worlds, homeschooling and institutional learning. Sometimes a parent will try out an institutional situation, find it wanting, quit it, and take up homeschooling. Other times, a family will give up on homeschooling, test out an institution, and decide to join it. A parent may find her child hurt by institutional schooling and so temporarily withdraws the child for a period of homeschooling and healing. Any parent may have to homeschool their child for a brief time, to cover a transition period such as finding a new school or avoiding bullies. The child would then leave school for that period of time and the parents would take responsibility for the schooling. When a new, acceptable situation is found, the parent may return the child to institutional schooling.

The child can spend quality time with the homeschooling parent and still benefit from specialized instruction in subjects like music, physical education, and French. He can access facilities such as music rooms, gyms, and libraries.

Timesharing allows homeschooling parents to spread out the responsibility for schooling. Not all parents feel comfortable teaching all subjects. Some parents find teaching mathematics difficult. Risk-averse parents thereby hedge their bets. Partial institutional
schooling is beneficial for homeschoolers in that it gives the child an opportunity to have classmates, which then leads to friendship. The teacher can provide expert instruction the parent lacks in such subjects as French and music. Not all parents have the talent, energy, and patience needed to homeschool their child full-time. Taking the child out of school for weeks or months of a school year can lead to powerful outside school learning such as travelling the world. From the teacher’s point of view however, it may be difficult to adapt instruction for students who miss long periods of classroom work.

Parents can work out deals with schools whereby the parent teaches some subjects at home and brings the child to class for specialized subjects. If things go well at school, they can increase the time there or, if things go badly, they can keep the child at home for more of the time. Children who find a specific class uncomfortable can simply drop it and the parent can then take up that subject at home.

Timesharing parents may perceive themselves as unwelcome guests in the school, not entitled to be there. They may believe that they have received some special favours that can be removed at the whim of some school administrator. While policy may sanction timesharing, making it a right and not a privilege, parents may still perceive their situation as precarious, be loath to complain, and feel the need to step carefully. Considering the vagaries of a principal’s personality, practice, or knowledge of policy, they are right to exercise caution. Regardless of the policies of the Board and the Ministry, each school or each principal interprets policy his or her own way, and what some timesharing parents might call a “bully principal” or a “cranky teacher” may need wooing or convincing to co-operate in a program of timesharing. You may prove the principal wrong in his understanding of policy, but he may not like you for it.

The timesharing parent has some obstacles to overcome. For example, parents need to build relationships with the principal, teacher, and other students, to help them accept an anomalous situation. In a situation where a child seems to receive special privileges and follows a different program, jealousy and resentment may build. The school’s staff may ask, “Why is that child demanding special attention?” Therefore, timesharing parents need to continually build relationships. As Anna discovered, when the principal’s term ends, when the teachers change from year to year, parents need to renegotiate the exceptional circumstance they desire for their child.

Timesharing can combine the best of both worlds, homeschooling and institutional schooling.
Strategy 8c: Schooling at Home

The concept. Homeschooling involves the education of children at home with parents, and sometimes tutors, instead of in public or private schools (Ravitch, 2007). “Homeschooling is considered to span a spectrum from those who school-at-home to those who unschool” (Greer, 2006). These two different methods of homeschooling have also been referred to as “structured” and “unstructured” (Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011). Unschoolers allow the child to follow his interests exclusively. In my experience with homeschoolers, I found that those who schooled at home had more in common with institutional schoolers than they did with unschoolers.

Schooling at home involves the use of organized subject matter as well as parental direction and teaching. Organized subject matter includes units of study, assigned work, timetables, and often a dedicated workplace. Those who school at home often replicate the rituals of the institutional school. One who I met even rang a bell to signal the start of the work period.

Parents have many resources to draw on. They can tap into Ministry and Board curriculum documents, textbooks, commercial units of study, and television and computer programs. The material arrives by mail, online, and from the local library or book store. Parent educators set their own goals, strategies, student activities, learning materials, and evaluation procedures (Pratt, 1980). Combining any of these resources to create units of study that custom-fit the child remains an option for those committed to a child-centred pedagogy. The parents I met who schooled at home tried to make learning as interesting as possible, however they felt a need to cover the subject matter, even when the child showed no great interest in it. These parents may use their own personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), or draw upon their own schooling experience using methods and materials similar to what their teachers used when they were children. Many of these homeschoolers share resources amongst themselves, forming strong networks, usually informal but also formal, such as the Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents (OFTP) (OFTP, 2014).

Parents who school at home keep pace with the Ministry of Education’s programs of study because they believe in organized subject matter. They protect their option of re-entering the system at any point in time. They avoid risking a Board investigation due to concerns “with respect to the instruction being provided in the home” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002). These parents are likely aware of the rules listed in Memorandum 131 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002) which outlines Ministry policy on homeschooling. In Ontario, parents need to
have “plans for educating the child,” “plans to ensure literacy and numeracy at developmentally appropriate levels,” and “plans for assessing the child’s achievement” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002). Parents are also obligated to inform their school board of their intent to provide home instruction at the beginning of each school year.

**Related narratives.** Both Veronica and I acted as teachers in Liam’s homeschooling years. Veronica’s morning JK program devolved from his interests, such as Lego, knights, and dramatic play. For Grade 1, I provided roughly 90 minutes per day of instruction in language arts and mathematics, but most of the day we unschooled. That summer, Veronica gave him direct instruction in reading.

Anna used organized subject matter to teach Paul language arts, science, mathematics, social studies, and visual arts. She kept Paul up to date with the expectations of the school system.

Lara taught her children from an assortment of material. Some were school board texts, some were online documents provided by Christian websites, and some were borrowed from libraries. Lara would spend many hours vetting these documents before presenting them to her children. She hired instructors whenever her children wanted to pursue a subject that she was not familiar with.

Before her Sudbury Valley School opened, Jennifer briefly homeschooled her boys, ordering commercial packages on subjects including reading, writing, mathematics, and science.

**Discussion and analysis.** I originally approached the study of homeschooling as if homeschooling were one single strategy. But, just as Martin-Chang and her fellow authors discovered in the midst of their study, I soon realized that there are “two distinct subgroups” (Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011, p. 197). The two subgroups they described are the structured homeschoolers (those who school at home) and the unstructured homeschoolers (those who unschool).

Studies show that homeschooling can lead to academic success (Rudner, 1999; Basham, 2001). However, of the two subgroups, at least one study found that children who school at home received “higher scores across a variety of academic areas” than those who attended public school (Martin-Chang et al., 2011, 199). However, in their exploratory analysis of a small sample, unschoolers generally scored below their expected grade level on the standardized test and the performance differences are substantial.

The parent who schools at home wants her child to be taught in the home milieu using a disciplined, scheduled, subject-oriented program of study. The parent-educators I met wanted to
keep open the possibility for entering the school system at any point (as we were with Liam and Lara was with Marion). They especially wanted to keep up with the mandated mathematics program because the concepts are sequential: the child must not fall behind or she may get lost and suffer a disadvantage if she returns to formal schooling. Those who school at home may try to follow the child’s interests, however many feel a need to cover the material whether the child is interested or not.

Parent-educators who follow what interests the child will still do so in an academic way. While the content of a unit may differ from the Ministry or Board documents, the parent aims for the processes and skills to meet or exceed the expectations of the grade level (Colfax & Colfax, 1988). Sometimes hiring a tutor will remedy the gaps in the parent’s knowledge of a subject. Many who school at home, such as Colfax, eschew institutional schooling because they know they can provide superior instruction. Unlike unschoolers, whose main purpose is to avoid what they see as regimentation, the negative messages of the medium of schooling (Gatto, 2002), many who chose schooling at home intended to gain high academic achievement.

Homeschoolers often form networks because they need support when defying the norm of society, the obligation to put the child in school. “Families interact with fellow home educators, providing mutual support and encouragement, often sharing their home instruction resources with each other” (Mayberry et al., 1995, p. 22).

For some of my participants, schooling at home was problematic. In other narratives, however, outside this study, parents found schooling at home very rewarding (Mayberry et al., 1995; Lees, 2014). Studies have also shown that homeschooling parents “should not feel that the education they are providing is inferior to the traditional K-12 education of their neighborhood peers,” (Jones & Gloeckner, 2004, p. 20) and that “analyses indicate that home school graduates are as ready for college as traditional high school graduates,” (p. 20).

In the scholarly literature, Romanowski writes of the successes of homeschooling, citing a study by Knowles:

Knowles (1991) surveyed adults who were homeschooled because of ideology or geographical isolation. None were unemployed or on welfare. Nearly two-thirds were self-employed. In addition, 94% of those surveyed stated that their home education prepared them to be independent persons, while 79% said it helped them interact with individuals from different levels of society. Knowles argued that because such a large percentage of those surveyed were self-employed, this provided evidence that
homeschooling develops an individual’s self-reliance and independence (Romanowski, 2006, p. 128).

One study, from 2004, claims that “research and probability show that the home-educated college applicant is very likely to succeed in college, both academically and socially,” (Ray, 2004, p. 9). It goes on to say that “colleges and universities will soon see a sudden growth in the number [of homeschoolers] applying for admission” (Ray, 2004, p. 10).

**Strategy 8d: Unschooling**

**The concept.** Because unschooling takes place in the home it is easy for it to be confused with schooling at home, the previous strategy. However, the methods are quite different (Greer, 2006; Martin-Chang et al., 2011). Families that unschool let the child follow her own innate curiosity, learning whatever captures her interest. Unlike schooling at home, where parent-educators ensure that the child receives “satisfactory instruction at home,” especially by keeping “literacy and numeracy at developmentally appropriate levels” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002), unschooling parents privilege having their children follow their own interests. If the child does not want to learn to read or do mathematics, then other subjects will fill the void, and that is fine. As Debra Bell writes, “The unschooling approach gives children complete autonomy in choosing what they will study, when, and for how long” (1997, p. 393).

According to Deborah Taylor-Hough, “Unschooling is essentially providing an education through the natural connections and activities in the child’s world, following their interests and aptitudes, without teaching within the confines of the rigid structures of conventional schooling” (2010, p. 9). Unschooling means learning without coercion: without externally mandated subject matter and instruction. Unschoolers encourage their children to look to their own interests for inspiration on self-directed learning activities, to create for themselves a personalized syllabus that is both more useful in their lives and easier for them to retain and build upon.

Perhaps the philosophy of unschoolers is best summed up by its unofficial originator, John Holt:

We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them . . . and helping them explore the things they are most interested in (2008, p. 88).
By this definition, unschooling means schooling without concerning oneself with keeping pace with the Ministry of Education’s programs of study. Of course, this also means that unschooling contravenes the Education Act, and if an investigation were to take place it would fall upon the parents to defend their home schooling standards.

**Related narratives.** One can view Liam’s JK activities as unschooling because he initiated most of the activities and Veronica and I facilitated them. In Grade 1, after some formal instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics, we would change to unschooling. Sometimes we would informally talk about subjects of interest, or just play, visit friends, and enjoy life. We had one foot in schooling at home and one foot in unschooling. Our friend Henry and his wife were bona fide unschoolers not concerning themselves with the Ministry’s policies on homeschooling, but leaving the city, long commutes, and marital breakdown undermined their project.

Lara was also a hybrid who schooled at home and unschooled. Sometimes, while schooling at home, if the subject matter Lara presented failed to engage her children, she would let the girls do their artwork, act out stories, or just play with their dolls.

Jennifer believed in free school, not homeschooling. In her story, unschoolers hijacked her Sudbury Valley School. She had little sympathy for unschoolers.

My other participants never dabbled in unschooling.

**Discussion and analysis.** In this study, two participants unschooled part-time. Neither Lara nor I had the faith or confidence to be full-time unschoolers. Ultimately, unschoolers trust that without any formal instruction during the elementary and secondary years the child will be able to successfully enter a post-secondary institution or start a career. I felt feelings of guilt, doubt, and anxiety for going off the beaten path. I feared that I was depriving Liam of the larger social situation conventional school offers and taking a terrible risk with his ability to keep up with his peers in the school system. Lara, too, was anxious to keep up with the province’s mandated curriculum just in case her children had to return to conventional schooling, which did happen.

Spouses take on different roles in home education. In my story, both Veronica and I followed the principles of unschooling by creating activities for Liam that interested him, but Veronica took care of teaching him to read, which would be required for him to return to institutional schooling. Lara’s husband shared her opposition to institutional schooling and backed the project financially while Lara ran the pedagogy. In Henry’s story, when he left the farm, his wife professed to continue unschooling but seemed to lack the resources to maintain a
rich, interesting program. One can see from this study that husbands and wives bring their own strengths, ideologies, and viewpoints to the world of homeschooling. In some marriages, parent-educators find they complement each other, in others they might find disagreements.

For Liam, the unschooling that went on in Grade 1 gave him an extra year of free, unstructured time before submitting to the school regime (Gatto, 2002). He got to be an unhurried child that year (Elkind, 1981). But he had to pay for it. In Grade 2 he had to work hard after hours to catch up with the school’s expectations, especially in reading.

The unschoolers that Lara and I met did not announce their unschooling status to the school board and tended to be secretive about it. Likely these parents feared that, if some interfering neighbour made a report and triggered an investigation under the Education Act, their home instruction would be found unsatisfactory because their children would not have developmentally appropriate literacy and numeracy skills. Parents who commit to the philosophy of unschooling stick to it because they believe that the method will pay off in the long term even if it seems to fail in the early years before the child discovers what subject matter he has a passion to learn.

It seems strange that unschoolers disregarded the philosophical framework of the free school in Jennifer’s story. Unschoolers and free schoolers are similar: they both privilege the child’s right and freedom to pursue and satisfy his own curiosity. Perhaps in Jennifer’s free school the other families were unschoolers in progress, meaning that their children had not yet found a subject that engaged them passionately. Without any purpose to structure their time they defaulted to trouble-making.

Unschooling in this study did not have particularly happy results. While Lara and my friend Henry had some successes, external circumstances, particularly marital breakdown and its attending financial problems, disrupted their home education. Any sort of homeschooling has family and financial implications. “It is not an easy decision to make because of the impact on the whole family,” Fiona Carnie states about homeschooling. “It is a huge commitment for parents in terms of time and energy and one major consequence is the reduction in the wage-earning capacity” (2008, p. 133).

In the literature, however, we find other narratives with more positive outcomes (Albert, D. A., 1999; Van Gestel et al., 2008). One story in The Unschooling Unmanual, told by Nanda Van Gestel, mentions that her family “can take all the time we need to experience life fully and learn from these special moments” (Van Gestel et al., 2008, p. 29). Kim Houssenloge states that her son was “learning to interact with the world safely and confidently and with room to grow.
and change in a natural way” (p. 39). Jan Hunt writes that her child’s learning method for “learning squares and square roots. . . would never have occurred to me, even if I had guessed correctly that he was ready for this subject at that early age” (p. 59).

Networking is very important for homeschoolers, and can support them “socially, ideologically, and politically” (Mayberry et al., 1995, p.21). Organized homeschoolers in Ontario (including both unschoolers and those who school at home) have a network called the Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents. This group particularly concerns itself with offering legal advice to homeschoolers who need to legally defend their decision to homeschool. Such defences make use of references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2014) that state that parents have a right to choose the kind of education their children receive (article 26[3]) and that no one should be compelled to belong to an association (article 20[2]). Further defences include reference to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) (article 11, the right to a hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal). The Home School Legal Defence Association offers legal aid to members who need it.

Unschooling can be thought of as a precursor to adult learning. When not taking courses or training for work, adults frequently conduct their personal learning as if they were unschoolers: when a topic catches their interest, they may give it attention and time and learn about it until their curiosity is satisfied. Thus we can think of unschooling as the most mature form of learning, that which is most often used by adults. Parent-educators design programs for their children (usually today, a small number), unlike teachers in institutional schools with 20, 30, or more students. For the schools, achieving individualized programs based on each child’s particular needs and drives would be a difficult task, because there’s just too many students to know and serve. The institutional school teacher has an additional disadvantage; the state requires her to teach topics that may have little or no intrinsic interest for her students. With homeschooling, the parent-educator has the distinct advantage of knowing the child’s personality, likes, and dislikes intimately. He knows how to keep the child motivated, engaged, and moving forward with inquiries that the child cares about.

A great tool for unschooling in this age is the Internet. The child has free choice and instant access to information that satisfies his personal research. The Internet almost justifies bypassing institutional school learning. “Online learning also opens up the possibilities of unschooling because as online learning takes place and snowballs into its own form of education, many learners might decide and realize that school is not needed to learn new knowledge,” (Siconolfi, 2010).
The proponents of unschooling claim that their program of education is founded upon the interests of the child. Up until this point, I have not questioned this precept. However, a more critical analysis leads to the question: “Where do these interests come from originally?” In this study, I note that parent-educators introduced activities, for example, Henry’s forging metal, which came from the world of the parent and not innately from the child. Nevertheless, the activity became interesting for the child. One can posit multiple reasons and motivations, including spending time with a parent, sharing the parent’s interest, and taking on an activity that is unique, and different from the subject matter of the child’s peers. It could therefore be argued that the interests pursued in unschooling are often fuelled by extrinsic factors just as they are in the institutional school.

Still, unschooling has many merits as pointed out by Leah McLaren in her *Globe and Mail* article. Reflecting on what sort of schooling would best suit her five-year-old, McLaren appreciated the unschooling ideals of free play and self-directed learning, she respected the idea that “children learn better when they are ready and willing, rather than when they are being pushed and prodded” (2014, August 28). However McLaren balked at the loss of income staying at home to unschool entails. She wished that unschooling were available in schools. She also criticized the fact that “unschooled children miss out on the discipline, emotional boundaries and social structure that prevail in regular schools.”

As this study concludes its final strategy, I find myself in agreement with McLaren’s compromising, practical conclusion: “I want my local school to unschool my children [in school] so I can work and pay the mortgage,” (2014, August 28).
Chapter Five: Conclusions

Opening

*Negotiating School* inquires into the lives of eight participants (myself included) who tried many strategies for making adjustments to their children’s schooling. The strategies for negotiating school range from zero or minimal school negotiating to unschooling.

I came to this thesis from a Deweyan perspective, thinking that my participants would want school to be more child-centred. But as time passed, and as I heard their stories, I found that some just wanted their children to do well in school, regardless of whether the schooling was traditional, progressive, or both.

While I was once a radical school negotiator, homeschooling, alternative schooling, and contributing to the founding of a free school, I ended up as somewhat of a conservative, placing my son in a traditional boys’ Catholic school. While I initially began schooling Liam by placing more value on his enjoyment and experiences than the lessons, I ended as a parent with great concern about his attaining scholarship grades.

Findings and Implications

A key finding of this study is that parents have choices beyond sending their child to the nearest tax-funded school, whether Catholic or public. However, this freedom is bounded by one’s finances, education, and self-confidence. Radical choices on the continuum such as unschooling are brave endeavours, but these take resources that few parents possess.

I came to this study with a bias towards child-centred, interest-based education. Common curricula promote subject matter that policy makers deem important but that the child may find “boring.” I came to appreciate how a child may develop a liking for some compulsory subject for which she had no previous interest simply because it is taught well, fits with some other concern, or satisfies a formerly undeveloped interest. Even when a student finds many of the compulsory subjects of her school day completely tedious, she can indulge her own interests through extracurricular activities, private lessons, and distance/e-learning. Since the invention of the Internet a child can answer any intriguing question on any topic through Google. However, no matter what its failings, the classroom is a place where the child may make friends, try out novel subject matter, and learn to align her thoughts and actions with the expectations of bureaucratic society.

All parents are school negotiators, but many do not negotiate actively. They end up defaulting to zero or minimal school negotiation. When they place the child in the neighbourhood school and never intervene, that, too, is a school negotiation decision.
The success of a strategy may depend on luck. A divorce can ruin an entire homeschooling project. The culture of one school within a school board may suit the child, but a different school in the same board may alienate him. Parents have to be nimble in their school negotiating. They have to be able to change strategies quickly, to accommodate any crises that arise as well as the evolving priorities of their family and the different phases of the child’s development.

Many factors contribute to an effective negotiating school strategy. When parents understand the possibilities of school negotiating, they realize that they do not have to feel guilty if they take their child out of the regular school to pursue homeschooling, alternative schooling, or any other approach. Nor should they feel defeated if they choose to return their child to public education.

School negotiating always existed, but it seems that it will be more common as time passes. Parents today are more actively involved with their child’s schooling than parents were in the 1950s. This thesis concerns the question of who has charge of the child. Decades ago, the answer was clear in the thinking of the vast majority: in the preschool years the parents had that authority, but once the child was of school age the institution of school took control. Many parents today want shared control of their child’s schooling.

The personal practical knowledge that Connelly and Clandinin (1988) discuss which teachers exhibit is even more pertinent to parents. If the teachers have this experiential style of knowing, then the parents, who can draw on a child’s lifetime of experience in all situations, must have it. This knowledge could be termed parental personal practical knowledge, and this study celebrates it.

Often parents will try to replicate strategies that worked positively in their own schooling while rejecting strategies that they considered harmful. They may not take into account that their own child is different, and that school may have changed. Using one’s own schooling as a template may be a mistake; over a generation school reform has substantially altered school systems, often for the better. Parents have an obligation to research school negotiating using scholarly works, narratives, and the media.

Active school negotiators hold the institution accountable for its mistakes. One parent may not be able to do that alone. On rare occasions, these parent-activists will band together and actually achieve change within a school or school board.

In any family, one parent may push for radical school negotiating, such as homeschooling, while the other is satisfied with the status quo. In this study, the spouses who
were content with public education were willing to follow the more adventurous parent, but we can imagine what tensions might have arisen if that parent were staunchly opposed to taking these extraordinary measures. Successful school negotiation requires agreement between the parents, or at least consensus, the willingness to go along with a decision even if it is not one’s preferred choice.

Parents can be highly involved in helping the child with her schoolwork, such as the science project or the next essay, but they face a conundrum: while sharing the learning activity may be a wonderful family event and the child may sometimes need a helping hand, continuing to help the child may undermine self-reliance.

Children have their own needs and wants. They desire independence as they approach adulthood. When the child leaves secondary school, the parents need to figure out what interventions in his education are still part of their jurisdiction and what belongs solely to him, and then make an accord. Letting go can be hard. Knowing when to stay in play is a struggle because the older adolescent may (and perhaps should) revolt against what he sees as unwanted interference. Parents need to learn how to gracefully scale down their school negotiating. Active school negotiators may find it hard to vacate their positions simply because the child has left secondary school. This is especially true when they are aware of their 18-year-old’s lack of skill at dealing with complex institutional matters. The post-secondary institutions take a hard line: They deal only with the student, not the parents. Perhaps privacy legislation requires that stance. But, when the student is in trouble (for example, when having a psychological crisis), he may lack the resources to get the help he needs without parental intervention.

Some children adapt to school without instruction, and do not need an active school negotiator. Others find the whole system confusing and painful, and desperately need the guidance of their parents.

Opportunities for Further Research

This study was conducted from the point of view of a parent. Rarely were children’s voices included, and when they were they were not the focus. A similar study could be conducted by collecting the children’s stories of school negotiating and their perspectives on their families’ choices.

I have no participants (excluding one “minor character”) who committed totally to unschooling. They all attempted some formal lessons for part of the day or week. Unschooling is radical: one trusts that the child will be able to enter the school system or a career without any
formal instruction. That seems counterintuitive, but the unschoolers claim that it works. Unschooling within the context of negotiating school requires further research.

Our narrative of distance/e-learning was simply the story of a minor character. If this person had been a full participant, we could have inquired more deeply into her experience. This too could be a future topic for study.

I am fairly confident that the strategies listed here cover most possible negotiating school strategies. A researcher, using another set of participants, might discover other techniques or reveal other forms of these strategies.

**Limitations of the Study**

Narrative inquiry generally uses a small number of participants (one, two, or three). I used eight, which led to a lengthy document, but this number has introduced the reader to a great range of narratives about negotiating school.

Normally graduate schools prefer that PhD candidates complete their theses in less than 12 years. But this length of time has been an advantage in that I witnessed the schooling of my participants’ children, typically from ages 6 to 18, making this a type of longitudinal study.

For the schooling of the participants themselves, this study was set in villages, towns, and cities from Italy, to Ireland, to Canada. The school negotiating they did for their children was limited to the large urban environments of mainly Toronto, but also Chicago. Two school negotiating strategies, alternative schools and magnet schools, would not likely be available in small town settings.

My participants were from the educated middle-class. They had more opportunities for school negotiating than some low-income parents, since some of those choices can take a great deal of time and money.

As a self study, my own story in Chapter 3 could have been influenced by personal bias. However, the fact that this study took some 12 years to complete gave me time to reflect on my experiences. Storying and restorying allowed me to clarify and deepen my narrative account. My story was concurrent with the stories of some other participants and we shared our viewpoints. Their version of events served as a check on any bias I might have had, as did Veronica’s insights and observations.

**Advantages and Applications**

*Negotiating School* benefited its 8 participants by providing a forum to reflect on and discuss schooling decisions. Much educational research appeals to a select audience of
professional educators, but *Negotiating School* concerns the universal themes of parenting and being parented, schooling and being schooled.

Using a narrative methodology allows readers to story and restory their own experiences. Readers can compare my participants’ stories to the stories of their schooling or the schooling of their children. Seeing the similarities and differences between the two can lead to new insights.

As a teaching document or resource book, I will apply my findings in this study to my practice as an educational consultant, coaching parents who are having trouble making school custom-fit the nature of their child or the values of their family.

Currently, policy makers concern themselves mainly with issues such as improving students’ skills in mathematics and science, and preparing them for the work world. This study suggests that they could pay more attention to school as a medium rather than only to its content. The interaction of the child and the school can be, at its worst, traumatic, which deserves more attention, thought, and action.

**In Conclusion**

Parents are searching for their “once and future school,” the place that satisfies both the child’s interests and society’s values. Some parents do find such a place, others have it as a goal that they continue to pursue.


National Center for Education Statistics, July 2004. _1.1 million homeschooled students in the United States in 2003._


Siconolfi, R. (2010). *How online learning has opened up the potential for unschooling: A personal narrative*. (Master’s dissertation). Nipissing University, North Bay, ON.


