WE DO THIS FOR THE NEXT CHILD: A MOTHER’S PHENOMENOLOGICAL AUTO NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO EXPERIENCING HER CHILDREN’S SCHOOLS

by

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This auto narrative study examined the phenomenon of a mother’s experience with the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system. The narrative consisted of 48 vignettes in which the author recalled when she interacted with educators in her three children’s schools between 1985 and 2004. It took place in four Canadian provincial jurisdictions (Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland, and British Columbia) and in six elementary schools, two junior secondary schools, and five secondary schools. Some schools were public schools and some were Catholic or Separate schools. One of the children was diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Disorder. Two of the children were assigned Individualized Education Plans.

The narrative was analyzed utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined by Max van Manen in *Researching Lived Experience* (1990). The analysis yielded seven themes: communications, cultural dissonance, expectations, otherness, professionalism, rage, and silencing.

The study revealed that communications between school and the mother centred on events and behaviours that were problematic for the school. Cultural dissonance arose because of the differences between the family and the regional cultures in which they lived. In addition, the family adjusted its own culture because of the presence of an Attention Deficit Disorder child. The mother’s expectation of her
experience of her children’s schools began as hope which was replaced by despair. The mother began to see herself as “other” and to a certain extent “otherness” was present in the children. Teachers defined themselves as professionals and were unwilling to value the information that could have been provided by the mother. Because of the actions of the schools in excluding him and in extending his sense of otherness, one of the children developed a deeply held sense of rage. The mother was actively silenced by schools but also passively silenced herself.

The central focus for this study was to identify the experience that one mother had of her children’s schooling. The significance of the study lies in the richness of the findings and their thematic interpretations. These provide reflective opportunities for other parents facing similar challenges and a chance for teachers and school administrators to engage in the life of a mother.

**Keywords:** attention deficit disorder; narrative inquiry; parent teacher relations; special needs; silencing

**Subject Terms:** Home and School; Parent-teacher relationships; Education-Parent participation
DEDICATION

This is for my children and children everywhere.

This is for my parents, my children’s father, and me as parents, and parents everywhere.

This is for my teachers, my children’s teachers, and teachers everywhere.

We do this for the next child.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Two Tracked Journey

This dissertation is a narrative inquiry that examines the phenomenon of a parent’s experience of her children’s schools; in fact it is auto narrative created from my experience of my children’s schooling. It is a pan-Canadian study taking place in four different provinces (Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland, and British Columbia), in six elementary schools, two junior secondary schools, and five secondary schools. It is an examination of my parental experience of the schools of my three children: Eldest Son (born in 1981), Middle Son (born in 1984), and Daughter (born in 1985). It is framed by Max van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined in his book *Researching Lived Experience* (1990). It uses auto narrative as a method. This method is used within many conceptual frameworks including phenomenology but also autobiographical narrative, autoethnography, and action research. The auto narrative method used here is rooted mainly in narrative inquiry and draws on Clandinin and Connelly’s book entitled *Narrative Inquiry* (2000). More broadly, this study is an amalgam of their approach and of narrative method in action research and autoethnography. It is also influenced by two other auto narrative examples provided by Clark Blaise (1993) in *I Had a Father* and Richard Rodriguez (1982) in *Hunger of Memory*.

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1 I will be using the term ‘school’ throughout the dissertation to mean the school system and in particular the human parts of the school system: teachers, administrators, and even other students. For example, in Chapter 6 when I say, “I sent my children to school”, I mean I sent them to a building in which there were teachers, administrators, other students, and even occasionally other parents. Taken all together, including building and humans, is the meaning I have given to the word ‘school’ throughout the dissertation.
The structure of this dissertation reflects a two tracked journey. On the one hand, it is academic research situated in a conceptual or intellectual framework and on the other hand, it is a personal story and a journey of self-discovery. The two are intertwined throughout the dissertation.

As illustration, I think of a bright sunny very cold winter day in 1982 possibly, during the time when we lived in Northwestern Ontario in a small village located geographically between Thunder Bay and Kenora. I am cross country skiing across and behind the lake (on which we all live) with three woman friends, whom I will refer to as fellow mining mothers. The cold temperature has caught us somewhat by surprise and our skis are not necessarily waxed for this condition. It takes effort to lift one ski then the other, pushing us forward. The snow conditions add to the effort of the journey. The snow is different in texture and temperature according to the position of the sun, the amount of tree cover, and the slope of the terrain. It is harder to ski here but easier in the next place. But what it does take is the constant pushing forward—one push of the leg in one track, then a push of the other leg in the other track. If this dissertation is a journey, then this is the type it is: two tracks always, varying contexts and terrains, always effort in pushing forward. One track is personal, self, private; the other academic, intellectual, public.

1.2 Outline of Chapter One

This chapter begins with a general discussion of the changes that have taken place in society and in education as they relate to parental roles and subsequent experience in school between my parents’ generation and my generation, which resulted
in great uncertainty for both teachers and parents. Narrative descriptions of my first and last experiences of my children's schools are provided. The chapter provides a rationale for writing this dissertation on the topic of experiencing my children's schools. I explain how the narrative chapter, Chapter Five, was produced. I provide information on the context within which my experience of schools took place including: the context of Canadian education, the context of the Canadian mining industry, and the special needs context of two of my children. Finally, I identify the research question, the research problem, and the significance of this study.

1.3 Parents and Schools: What Was Once and What I Experienced

Parents experienced schools through the roles that they either took for themselves or were assigned by either society or the schools. Becker and Epstein (1982) and Moles (1982) identified five roles for parents in relation to schools: governance, volunteerism, creating a learning environment at home, involving parents directly in the classroom, and contracting with the parents a role in the performance of homework and reinforcing behaviour expectations at school in the home. These roles were undergoing change as Eldest Son entered school in 1985. The main reasons for the changes in the parent-school interface were changes that had recently occurred in society. Sometime between when I had completed kindergarten to grade twelve (K-12) (actually grade one to grade thirteen in my case) in 1969 and when Eldest Son entered school in 1985, North American society and the education system that society administered had changed radically. Those changes included: the rise of two-income families, the centralization of school boards, the directing of curriculum from Ministry of Education offices, the university education of teachers, and the unionization of teachers, in short the results of
modernization and urbanization (Comer, 1986). Comer (1986) conjectured that while these changes caused a loss of parent involvement in school, no new role for parents immediately emerged. It was during the period that my children were in school, (1985 to 2004) that, as the literature review of Chapter Two indicated, new roles evolved, were assigned, and were negotiated. During the period in which I experienced school as a parent, parental roles were experimental, tentative, and conditional (Becher, 1986).

When I was in school, parents were involved directly in governance. The school boards were very local. I grew up on a farm and I attended a one-room school house that was in the corner of our pasture. My parents knew, not only the trustees but, for at least two generations, also the families of every child in the school. The school that I attended was the same school that my two sisters and later my two brothers attended and, although not the same building by the time I attended, nevertheless it was the same school that my father (born in 1909) attended. I believe that the experience I had at school was much the same experience that my father had at school and as a result my parents experienced their children's schooling much as their parents had.

Governance was the dominant role and there were few other roles that parents took on in those days. In 32 pupil years in which their five children went to the school in the pasture, I do not remember a single incidence of my parents even entering the school building. They did attend Christmas concerts and school picnics, however, these were not held in the school, but rather, the former in a community hall, the latter in a park. My mother did supervise homework though and I can remember her helping me study explorers in Social Studies in about grade four or five. Pre-spelling test review was also
part of our family routine, but in later years it became “kid on kid”, rather than parental participation per se. This was my role model of how a parent should experience school.

Presumably, I learned to be a parent at school from my parents and in many ways I think it was what I would have preferred as compared to what I actually experienced. I willingly created a learning environment at home but, as my parents had, beyond that I would have preferred having little to do with the school. But things were changed for me and my children. These changes meant that in fact I had no role model on which to base my behaviour, and that teachers were just beginning to understand the impact of societal and systemic changes, and perhaps were not confident of their dealings with parents either. Collectively we were a new generation. Things were different and uncertain. We were no longer part of homogeneous grounded communities (Epstein and Becker, 1982).

Observing the impact of societal changes, Epstein and Becker (1982) noted that teachers reported that the complexity of the parent-child relationship often interfered with the learning process, that parents were undependable, that they lacked training, and that they often did not share the same values and goals as the school. Parental involvement was fraught with problems. Evans and Bass (1982) observed that many parents believed that education was best left to educators. Moles (1982) reported that teachers did not support parental involvement in governance, curriculum development, or instruction, but they found it acceptable for parents to assist and supervise homework. However, Moles (1982) reported that teachers felt that they should provide either formal or informal instruction to help parents. From the parents’ perspective, he observed that
there were also barriers. Parents had work demands that did not fit with the school’s schedule of events. The parents in his study also observed cultural differences between the family and the school and generally felt anxious in dealing with school staff. This latter feeling was produced because the school tended to only communicate bad news to parents. Comer (1986) observed that teachers conceived of themselves as professionals and adopted the medical model whereby students were seen as bad or sick. “Parents”, he observed, “of the children they treat are put on the defensive, and so the parent/school relationship is further complicated” (p. 444). Seeley (1989) observed that the delegation model had created a gap between families and schools. Parents, he claimed, received the signal from the organization of society and the institutions within it that they did not have to be involved in their child’s schooling because education had been delegated to the schools. Teachers were professionals; teaching was therefore not the job of parents.

In any case, as the generation passed, one of the most important roles that parents played, that is, direct governance, had been given up and their ability and desire to be involved in their children’s schools was lost in the changes that society had undergone. As Eldest Son entered school in 1985 we (parents and teachers alike) were all living in a type of parental involvement no man’s land. Says Benson (1997):

Once upon a time parents sent their children off to school each day...

Parents believed that public education unquestionably offered hope for the future....Parents did their job sending their children to school, and the schools did their job educating children. And everybody seemed satisfied.
A fairy tale? A mythical time that never really existed?...The school system educated their children reasonably well it seemed, and virtually without parent input or advice...

What has happened to change this story of faith, hope and belief in the public education system?...

What is the experience of parents with their schools today at this time in our society where “change forces” (Fullan, 1993, quoted in Benson, 1997, p.2) are described as reaching a breaking point? (Benson, 1997, pp.1-3).

I offer this dissertation as a way to extend the conversation around Benson’s question of what is the parental experience, however, the time period I will be examining will be not today (2009), but 1985 to 2004.

1.4 Ending and Beginning

The ending came in a theatre in downtown Vancouver on a hot June day in 2004. Daughter, dressed in cap and gown, crossed the stage, one of some three hundred and eighty students who crossed that day, in the graduation ceremony of a suburban secondary school. Although I must admit to feeling some pride in her accomplishment, it was not the main or overwhelming emotion that I felt. As I sat in the audience with my husband and my daughter-in-law-to-be I was, in fact, greatly relieved. Under my breath I kept saying, “It’s over. It’s over. It’s finally over.” What was over was what I can only describe as a long march, a relationship with the kindergarten to grade twelve sector (K to 12) in Canada, over 19 years, in four provinces and through six elementary schools, two junior high schools, and five high schools.

The beginning was on a very warm fall day in September of 1985, when Eldest Son’s life (and thus our family’s life) at school began. He was three weeks short of
his fourth birthday. I walked him to school that morning as he began maternelle or junior kindergarten in a Francophone Separate school in a Northwestern Ontario mining and forestry community, population 2,000. Not only did I walk him, but I also pushed his 17-month-old brother in a stroller and I was six months pregnant with who would be his sister. The most wonderful dog you could ever imagine accompanied us. Her name was Ballou² (for the bear in The Jungle Book). By breed she was most probably Leonberger (Saint Bernard size, amber coat, yellow eyes) but by disposition she was patience, tolerance, and canine nanny. Fall comes early to Northwestern Ontario and although I was in a blue gingham sun dress and the “about to be student” was in turquoise shorts, the birch leaves were already turning in our backyard and along the edge of the lake en route to the school. The “about to be student” and Ballou ran ahead of us as we made our way. The school was a white aluminum-sided building. It was a five-room school that served up to grade eight. Maternelle (junior kindergarten) and jardin (kindergarten) were held together in one room. We arrived at the school. The newest student walked through the gate. He turned to me and said, “You can go now Mom.” He disappeared inside the school. I remember standing there looking through the chain link fence of the school yard with tears running down my face.

In truth, he had shed his tears the night before. I had told him, “You’re going to school tomorrow, now don’t you think it’s time you gave up your bottle?” As he handed me the bottle, his response, tears running down his face, was, “When will I have to give up Gygy” (his name for his security blanket)? I told him I didn’t care; he could

² I appreciate that Kipling spelled Baloo B-a-l-o-o but we have always spelled it B-a-l-l-o-u. Ballou was given to us already named with the irregular spelling, I have kept it here.
take it to university with him. (Years later when visiting an apartment he shared with his
girlfriend, now wife, at university I discovered while making their bed not only Gygy but
also a much loved, worn out, and long ago white stuffed polar bear named Andy. Later,
when I inquired of Andy’s owner, she told me that her mother had told her that she would
never get a boyfriend if she kept sleeping with Andy. I wrapped Andy in Gygy, as you
would a newborn baby. They seemed quite happy together.)

I knew that day by the chain link fence was momentous. It was optimism then,
my tears were of joy, I am sure. In between the hope at the beginning and the despair at
the ending is this story, the telling of how one parent experienced her children’s schools.
In the spring of 2005, when the idea of an auto narrative inquiry for this doctoral
dissertation originally came to me, it was true that I felt traumatized recalling the
experiences that I had as my children participated in K–12. To some extent they felt
traumatized too, in particular, Middle Son and Daughter. I was a middle-class woman
with a couple of university degrees myself, with a husband with a couple of university
degrees (even one in education) yet we felt completely overwhelmed as we dealt with our
children’s schools throughout the 19-year period. Nothing could have prepared us. It felt
to us that the schools that we experienced across the country either did not know how to,
or preferred not to, deal with parents. I am not saying that the schools did not deal with
the children as they saw fit, but they certainly did not welcome us as parents into the
decisions that were being made about our children. Although we signed forms of consent
and were told “we think the best thing to do is”, we always felt at fault, unwelcome, and
shut out.
To be truthful it was me doing 95% of experiencing the schools. My husband did not get involved much, and I have documented in the narrative the times he significantly did. Both my husband and I have had successful professional careers (currently he is vice president of a mining company and I am vice president of a university) yet, when it came to school, we were talked down to, treated as if we were stupid, shut out of significant decisions, and always left with the feeling that we were at fault for whatever transgression or event that was the most recent topic of conversation. That is most certainly the way we felt. It is the experience we had. Our constant companions were blame, shame, and guilt.

Did other parents in Canada and beyond share my experience of schools? When I completed the literature review presented in Chapter Two it seemed, even in this time of negotiating new roles for parents, that still the majority (about 70% or more) of parents were satisfied with their experiences with schools. Griffith (1997) found parents were satisfied when they scored the school highly on school climate, school-parent communications, and empowerment of parents. Salisbury, Branson, Altreche, Funk, and Broetzmann (1997) considered that improving parent satisfaction was a way to improve the quality of schools where quality included the school being truly caring, parents being informed, and parents having their input valued. MacIntyre and Mustel (2002) conducted a random sample in British Columbia and reported that 77% of parents were satisfied. Falbo, Glover, Stokes, Holcombe, Lee, Inchauste, Provost, and Schexnayder (2003) completed a study of parent satisfaction in Austin, Texas and found that 73% of parents were generally satisfied. Overall, these levels of satisfaction results were reported generally in the literature. I lived in the tail of dissatisfaction it seemed, with only 30% of
other parents living there with me. My first raw motivation to explore this phenomenon further (the personal, self, and private) before I engaged in the intellectual exercise required by this dissertation was to understand why I had been dissatisfied.

Once I had decided that examining my experiences of my children’s schools was to be the main focus of this dissertation, the next step was relatively easy. I made a list of 48 incidences (hence forth called vignettes) in which I could remember interacting with my children’s schools, that is, experiencing their schools. I wrote the list in one evening. I have not modified it since that first evening. From October 2005 to January 2006, I wrote one vignette per evening (that I had time available to write) until I was finished. This was the birth of the narrative chapter, Chapter Five, of this dissertation, “Our Life at School: A Penguin’s Mother Finds Voice”. I had it completed for almost three years before I wrote the rest of the dissertation.

1.5 Making Sense

The next task and remaining tasks have taken the better part of three years. It was also the intellectual task for which I had no grounding and no experience. There were important questions to be answered: Why did I think my story needed to be told? Having told it, what did it mean? These were basic personal questions, with potentially wider relevance, that needed to be answered for me long before I entered into the discussion of the conceptual framework of hermeneutic phenomenology or the method of narrative.

My purpose in writing was to share with others the experiences I had, somewhat as a cautionary tale. I hoped that teachers would read it and reconsider some of their current practices. I hoped that, in particular, education students would read it and
challenge some of the things they were being taught. It is my voice told from my perspective, a kind of parental reflective practice (Schön, 2000).

The question of “What does it mean?” is problematic. Personally, privately, and perhaps superficially, my first attempt at understanding led me to believe that many of the techniques used by schools, by teachers were ill-conceived and just plain wrong or cruel. As someone with my particular background (25 years as a labour negotiator from the management side) would, I blamed such a lack of accountability for the behaviour of schools (of teachers) on the employment relationship that teachers have because of unionization. It seems that a teacher can be cruel to your child and there is no possible repercussion; often nothing can be done but for the child and parent to endure. This is illustrated many times in my narrative; the vignette entitled ‘On the Richter Scale’ 3 perhaps the clearest. More deeply, and as I shared the narrative with others, it became evident that some of the responsibility for what was clearly a problematic relationship, must be placed squarely at my feet. As my sister-in-law, Jill Browne4 (one of the early readers of my narrative) pointed out, not so much in the beginning, but by the end we were “one strike” people. “Where were the other two?” she asked me (Browne, Personal Communications, October 2006). I saw the school systems we were involved with, although they were in four different provinces and six different communities not to mention 13 different schools, as one system. To stick with the baseball analogy a ball

3 I will be using the format of single quotes ‘On the Richter Scale’ to refer to the titles of the vignettes within my narrative.

4 Jill Browne, my sister- in- law, is married to my youngest brother and she has a long history with me. She and my brother began dating when she was in grade ten and he was in grade eleven some 38 years ago. They live in Calgary and have two children; a daughter a year older than Daughter and a son one year younger. Jill is by training a lawyer and also has an MBA. She provided me with many genuinely honest although at times painful for me comments on my narrative and I have shared them with my readers throughout.
pitched in Ontario crossed the plate in Quebec and landed in the catcher's glove in Newfoundland. For us it was all one. Each experience laid the foundation for the next although the location and players may have been different. If there was no context for the education professionals on the other side of the conversation, there was plenty of knowledge of previous experiences for us. This interpretation still allowed the tale to be useful. Perhaps if others (teachers, students, administrators) read about a parent's experience that resulted from certain actions and leading to certain behaviours, they might consider the reasons behind such behaviours as they interact with parents. This personal lens was intertwined in the intellectual analytical stage. To return to the cross country skiing analogy momentarily, this was the first leg I pushed down on, waiting to take the next stride using the other leg.

It was the positing of these two basic interpretations (the schools could not be held accountable for misdeeds; the parents had learned “one strike” behaviour) that had naturally led me to think about intellectual interpretation and understanding. It was useful to step outside the personal and look at the intellectual way of interpreting and understanding. The further removed I became from the experience and then the construction of the narrative, the easier it became to interpret and understand. The “research” of this dissertation really existed or came about in three very separate stages. The first stage was experiencing, which took place from September 1985 to June 2004. The second stage was narratizing the experience, which took place from October 2005 through January 2006. The third stage was analyzing with a hope of interpreting and understanding both the experience and the narrative, which took place personally and non-academically from September 1985 to December 2007 and was grounded in a
conceptual framework from January 2008 onward. Reason and Marshall’s (1987) notion of research as for me, for us, and for them aptly captured the three stages. This understanding has helped me develop what Reason (1994) called critical subjectivity:

Critical subjectivity means that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are aware of that perspective and of its bias, and we articulate it in our communications. Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing (p. 326-327).

I had not given up on my first personal and private interpretations but rather I had built on them, pushed them forward on to the second track now.

1.6 The Context

There were other factors beyond the schools’ (as organizations), teachers’, administrators’ behaviour, and my behaviour that needed to be identified. Our family was part of the unique group of Canadian mining people and have, therefore, moved more than most people. Canadian mining people follow the developing ore bodies, back and forth across the country. It was the nature of that business. We had not moved more or less than other mining people we knew. The intertwined history of moves, children, and schools was provided below.

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5 The Canadian mining industry requires the movement of people across the country and for that matter around the world. In general, every family that is involved in that industry moves at least every five years. The nature of the business is cyclical and depends on the uncertainty of commodity prices. We began our journey in 1977 in Northern Manitoba (copper/zinc) then Northwestern Ontario (1981–1986) (copper) then Northern Quebec (1987–1989) (gold) then Northern Ontario (1987–1991) (gold) then Western Newfoundland (1991–1996) (gold) then Northern British Columbia (1997–2001) (gold). In 2001 we moved to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, this time following my employment rather than my husband’s. Although the family stayed in the Lower Mainland after 2001, my husband had mining jobs in Ecuador, Kamloops, the Yukon, and China.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>School Type</th>
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<td>Daughter</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Grade 1</td>
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6 Coded for reason for changing school: 1. Starting school for the first time. 2. Due to moving. 3. Progression in school system. 4. Purposefully changing school.
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<td>Grade 12</td>
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</table>
If you count the “No”s in the “Same School as Last Year” column, you will count 19. Of these 19 “No”s, 3 (coded as 1 on the chart) were starting school for the very first time, 10 (coded as 2 on the chart) were due to moves, 4 (coded as 3 on the chart) were due to progression in the school system (i.e. elementary to secondary etc.) and 2 (coded as 4 on the chart) were due to purposefully changing schools. The reasons for these purposeful changes were provided in the vignettes ‘Ambushed’ and ‘An Italian Angel’. In ‘Ambushed’ we changed Daughter from a Francophone Separate School to an Anglophone Separate School because she was identified as having poorer than average gross and fine motor skills and despite the fact that she understood and could speak French, the school determined that language could become a complicating factor in her case. In ‘An Italian Angel’ Middle Son was convinced by a student of the local Catholic high school that he would be much happier there than at the public junior secondary school he had been attending. He was.

1.6.2 Canadian Context

This table identified a uniquely Canadian feature of education. In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility. This means that each of the 10 provinces and two territories\(^7\) has its own educational structure, curriculum and, as the chart indicates, nomenclature.

Schools in Canada may or may not be organized around religion and/or language. In Ontario, there is a full publicly funded public and Separate (Catholic) school system. There is also full publicly funded French, Immersion, and English system for

\(^7\) When most events of my narrative took place, there were only two Canadian territories, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Nunavut became Canada’s third territory on April 1, 1999.
families desiring one of these particular types of schooling. For example, when we lived at the mine site in Northern Ontario, 18 families lived there. Amongst those 18 families, we sent our children to a total of six different elementary schools: English Separate, French Separate, Immersion Separate, English Public, French Public, and Immersion Public. In Quebec, at the time we lived there, there were also fully publicly funded English and French school boards. The French school boards tended to be Catholic and the English school boards tended to be Protestant. However, in the community in which we lived there was an English Catholic school administered by the French school board. In Newfoundland, during our time there, schools were either organized along religious lines or not. In the community in which we lived there were fully funded Catholic and non-Catholic schools. But in other communities there were schools for specific Protestant religions as well. Newfoundland has since eliminated fully funded schools organized by religion and now has one public school system. In British Columbia, Catholic schools receive some public funding. From the point of view of curriculum there was not a smooth transition of schooling from one Canadian jurisdiction to the next. Moving around as we did presented challenges enough for a family; facing the complexities of the Canadian education system added another layer. However, for historical, political, and cultural reasons, it was the way of Canadian education.

1.6.3 **Personal Context**

To begin with we chose Catholic education for our children. In 1985, when we made the decision regarding to which school we were going to send Eldest Son, it was

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8 For anyone who wishes to understand the history, rationale and other vagaries of the Canadian education system *Understanding Canadian Schools* authored by two University of Manitoba professors Young and Levin (2002) is a useful reference.
based on our belief that Catholic education was education that included instruction in values. It was our view, right or wrong, that the public school system in Ontario at that time was purposely designed to be a value-void. My husband was born and raised a Catholic and had been educated in Catholic schools through grade twelve. Our children were all baptized Catholics and eventually all received the sacrament of communion. At this time we were active in the Catholic Church in this community. The Catholic school in the community where we were living was a Francophone school. The language of the playground was English. This proved to be a fortuitous circumstance as our next move was to the heart of Francophone Quebec.

There we sent Eldest Son to an Anglophone Catholic school. The language of the playground was French. I can only tell you as justification that we are Canadians and when in Ontario we exercised our French language rights and when in Quebec we exercised our English language rights.

When we moved back to Ontario, we exercised our French language rights again. Daughter attended a Francophone Separate school for maternelle (junior kindergarten). The justification for this was simple. She spoke French anyway because for two years in Quebec we had a French only speaking nanny. In fact, Daughter spoke French before she spoke English. If I had sent her to the same school as her brothers, she would have gone in the afternoon to junior kindergarten and Middle Son would have gone to kindergarten in the morning and I, as a working mother, would have needed child care all day. This way with Daughter in the Francophone school, they both went in the
morning. The next year and the year after, all three children attended the same English Separate school.

The year after that we moved to Newfoundland. For the first year all three children were in the same Catholic elementary school. The school required the wearing of uniforms. The boys wore white or light blue dress shirts or turtlenecks and navy pants with black shoes. Daughter wore a navy blue tunic with a white or light blue blouse or turtleneck and white, navy, or light blue (scarce as hen’s teeth, I did manage to buy three pairs in Saint Pierre-Miquelon) tights and black shoes. On cold winter days the girls were permitted to wear navy slacks instead of tunics. All three children were in Catholic schools for the entire time we were in Newfoundland. Two years after we left, Newfoundland eliminated provincial support for parochial schools.

When we arrived in British Columbia, Eldest Son wanted to continue in a Catholic high school. The Catholic high school was in the neighbourhood we were living in and he attended this school for grade eleven and twelve. We paid a small tuition. For Middle Son the choices we faced were difficult. He had been one year in a junior high in Newfoundland but the neighbourhood public system in the British Columbia community in which we lived required that he attend a high school for grade eight. In my view, he was not mature enough for a high school. We made the decision to send him out of the neighbourhood to a junior secondary school that housed grade eight, nine, and ten in a downtown rather than suburban setting. He was sent to a programme called Transition

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9 In Canada, a tunic means a ‘jumper’ which (in Canada) means a sleeveless dress meant to be worn over a blouse or shirt. A tunic is usually a navy blue jumper of a specific design: a yoke in the front and back just below the neckline, with three box pleats in the front and three box pleats in the back, and with a belt that buttons in the front just below the waist.
Eight. Grade eight was a success; grade nine was a disaster. For grades ten and eleven he attended the same Catholic high school that his brother had, Eldest Son having graduated and attending university by this time. In the meantime, Daughter attended grade six and seven at a neighbourhood public school. For the first time in her school life she was able to go home for lunch and she chose that over uniforms, bussing and Catholicism.

Four years later we came to Greater Vancouver. Middle Son was entering grade twelve and Daughter was entering grade ten. It was very important, to Daughter at least, not to be in the same school as her brother and, as fate would have it, we moved into a house that was on the dividing line of two secondary schools’ catchments. Although we were officially in one school’s catchment, I pleaded my case to the two principals and Middle Son went one way and Daughter went the other. It was here, as already mentioned, that K to 12 ended for us.

1.6.4 Canadian Mining Industry Context

It was important to think about all the moves we made as a family when reflecting on our history with K to 12. We moved many times and perhaps it offered some insight into my parental experience with the schools. The literature on itinerant/migrant/traveler children was almost entirely devoted to issues of socioeconomic class in the European context (Sullivan, 2006) and language and culture as well as socioeconomic class in the American context (Anderson and Overdorf, 2002; Branz-Spall, Rosenthal, and Wright, 2003; Brunn, 2002; Romanowski, 2002). These studies identified itinerancy as a further complicating factor that was intertwined with already identified risk factors of socioeconomic status, language, and culture. Itinerancy
in our case, perhaps unknown to the schools, was intertwined with whatever risk factors were associated with having professional parents and being part of the employed middle class.

The reasons for the moves were many. Sometimes moving occurred because the mine was closing. Sometimes moving occurred to obtain a professional promotion. Sometimes moving was the result of a corporate transfer. We all did it. I can think of at least 10 other families who shared this journey with us. Sometimes we ended up in the same communities with each other again and again and sometimes we did not. In fact, if you have never left your home base, you can ponder this: because we were all mining people in this together, Middle Son had in his grade four class in Newfoundland two other children who had been in his kindergarten class in Northern Ontario, one had come to Newfoundland via Houston, British Columbia and the other had come via Cairns, Australia. (Both families now live in Ontario, one on the shores of Lake Huron, the other in Thunder Bay.)

Was frequent uprooting a further risk factor for our children in school in the manner in which it was described in the studies mentioned above? I am doubtful. These were the children of mining engineers, geologists, and other professionals. The families valued education as one would expect from that particular educated socioeconomic group. For example, to date, educational results of the 20 children of the 10 families that journeyed with us are comprised of three community college graduates, 11 bachelor’s degrees, three master’s degrees, one medical doctor and two that I am not sure of, but I believe both attended but did not complete some sort of post-secondary education. In the
case of my children I knew, although the schools may not have, that these were flexible, adaptable, and resilient children who expected to move every four to five years. They were never surprised by it. Many people they knew moved too. Moving was the reality of Canadian mining industry, period. As mining people we always said the money moved north to south but the people moved east to west. One thing all the moving did do, though, was validate the universality of the nature of my experience with K to 12. It did not happen in one isolated school or community, or only in the Catholic or public system. There were perhaps other reasons for strained parent-school interaction.

**1.6.5 Special Needs Context**

Middle Son was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder at age 26 months, a diagnosis that we have lived with and have never disputed. The vignette entitled ‘The Pre-School Life of Middle Son’ elaborated on this. Daughter was born during rapid labour, resulting in a possibly related outcome in that she has clinically demonstrated poorer than average gross motor and fine motor skills. This was discussed in the vignette ‘Ambushed’. Eventually they were each given Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and identified as special needs by the K to 12 system and yet eventually on their own merit, they both became undergraduates at Simon Fraser University, one of the consistently highest-rated comprehensive universities in Canada. (Daughter will most likely graduate in the spring of 2009; Middle Son, with continued perseverance, will most likely graduate in 2010.)
1.7 The Research Problem

In 2000, Lasky ended her article "The Cultural and Emotional Politics of Teacher-Parent Interactions" with this suggestion for further research: "What do parent-teacher interactions look like from parents’ perspectives"... (pg. 858). My study was oriented around the parental experience of school. Parent experience of school was important as parental attitudes, presumably formulated by experience, towards their children’s school influenced their children’s, not only attitude but also, performance in school. My experience of my children’s schools was for the most part (it is important to recognize not exclusively) unpleasant and unsatisfactory. I thought that my exploration of this phenomenon might spare others the agony. If “they” could just see what “they” had done to people (me, my children) “they” would stop doing it. Surely, schools intended to be pleasant and welcoming places for all parents and all children. Certainly, authors such as Linda Darling-Hammond (1995, 1997), Gordon (1999), and Noddings (2003, 2005) thought that school should be better than what I had experienced as a parent. My hope for my children’s schooling became despair, and as a result, I was silenced and I silenced myself. This study raised the possibility that there might have been disconnections between what the schools intended a parent to experience and what a parent actually experienced.

In 1985 as Eldest Son entered school, schools were uncertain as to what role, if any, parents should play in their child’s education. Parents were unsure as to what role, if any, they should play. We were from a unique cultural subset, the management and professional staff of the Canadian mining industry. We looked like other itinerants to teachers perhaps, but we did not behave like them. The space for me as a parent almost
certainly needed to be negotiated at school but, perhaps because of the relatively short length of stay in any given community or school, I was either never given nor did I take the opportunity. As a result in 19 years, I never went to one parent-teacher night that I did not come out of feeling humiliated, ashamed, deeply concerned, and wondering exactly what my children were being exposed to. After the incident related in 'The Last Parent-Teacher Nightmare’, I stopped going as a matter of principle. I did relent a few times when I received a call, usually from the principal, indicating that I should attend. Nevertheless, for the last two years of high school Daughter explained to her teachers, "My mom doesn’t do parent-teacher nights.” When it came to discussing academic matters I never once felt welcomed by any of my children’s schools. I was going to make that statement more general and say that I never once felt welcomed by their schools in any context. But that is not true. I felt welcomed at a few plays and theatrical productions in which all three of my children participated and were greatly interested.

What impact did our feeling shut out have? At 18, Daughter, in college and for the first time having real success in school, offered a glimpse. Bright and capable, she was mature enough to begin to realize what happened to her in K to 12. She said to me one night in fall 2004, “In all the time I was in school, didn’t they once realize that my inability to print neatly had nothing to do with my intellectual capacity?” I replied, “I guess not.” And then she said to me, “Why didn’t you tell them?” In order to answer her question I needed to answer mine.
1.8 The Research Question

What is my question? There are many forms of it. I started with how did I get from the chain link fence and tears of joy to where I am now? The narrative itself answered that question. The overriding question of this dissertation was: What is the experience of a parent when interacting with her children’s schools? The interpretation and understandings of the phenomenon through the narrative form answered this question. Is this the way parents were supposed to feel? Is this what the schools intended? At the time my children were attending school, did schools expect parents to be involved or did they expect that parents would simply accept the recommendations of professional teachers? Were parents satisfied with this state of affairs? Finally what do parents experience when interacting with their children’s schools? The literature review in Chapter Two was designed to address the first two of these issues: involvement and satisfaction. Overall, this narrative made a contribution to the interpretation and understanding of parental experience. What can be learned by parents, students, and educators from this particular narrative? The analysis in Chapter Six and the discussion in the implications and conclusion section of Chapter Seven answered this question.

1.9 Significance of the Study

This was one case, one lived experience that has now ended. It was over for me. We do this now for the next child, not our children. In fact the “we” in the title of the dissertation specifically included my children. Readers and critics of this narrative can say: “There were a lot of extenuating circumstances. The family moved a lot. The children had special needs. They were mostly involved in Catholic schools. The mother worked. Things have changed radically in those 19 years and these events would never
happen now.” If all of those statements fully explained my parental experience of my children’s schools then this study had no significance and it was simply a cathartic experience for me to write it. But if one professional engaged in the training of teachers, one student teacher, or one teacher learned from this cautionary tale something about what the parent experiences or considered the impact of that experience on the child then that was the significance of this study. I wanted no parent to feel about his/her children’s schools as I felt and I wanted no child to feel about his/her schooling experience the way that Middle Son, in particular, felt about significant parts of his. Over the years, I have worried constantly about parents who might find themselves in the situation that we found ourselves in vis-à-vis the school system, who because of economic, educational, or cultural circumstances were less capable of dealing with it than we were. This narrative is for them and their children.

1.10 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation was an auto narrative inquiry into the phenomenon of a parent’s experience of her children’s schools. The phenomenon being researched was the parental experience of K–12 schools. The phenomenon was analyzed according to a hermeneutic tradition that interpreted to seek understanding, more specifically one mother’s understanding of her experience of her children’s schools. Chapter Two reviewed the current literature on parent-school interactions under the headings of involvement, satisfaction and experience. Chapter Three was a discussion of Max van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenological approach as the conceptual framework for this study. Chapter Four was a discussion of narrative method with particular attention paid to auto narrative. Chapter Five was comprised of the narrative itself. Chapter Six provided
an analysis of the narrative from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective according to van Manen’s framework and provided a discussion of my interpretations and understandings. Chapter Seven concluded the study and provided understandings, broad implications, and suggestions for further research. Appendix One was a series of additional narrative vignettes that were produced as I analyzed the themes produced by the narrative, Chapter Five of the dissertation. The narratives of Appendix One were, for the most part, produced as I analyzed the theme of Otherness identified in Chapter Two and elaborated in Chapter Six, but there were other topics as well. Appendix Two was an extension of the metaphor mentioned in Chapter Three and elaborated in Chapter Six concerning the theme of Rage. Appendix Three and Appendix Four were the data that were used in the detailed analysis section presented in Chapter Six.

1.11 Summary of Chapter One

This dissertation was a two tracked phenomenological auto narrative. The two tracks were the personal and self and the academic and intellectual. It was framed by Max van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology as identified in the book Researching Lived Experience (1990). The method was narrative as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and others.

School began for my children in 1985 and ended in 2004. As all parents do, I began with great hope for my children’s experience at school and for my experience of their schools. Somehow, somewhere along the way that hope turned to despair to the point that I was greatly relieved when the experience ended. In 2005, I decided to write about that experience for this doctoral dissertation. I wrote the narrative, Chapter Five,
from October 2005 to January 2006. The narrative consisted of 48 vignettes in which I recalled experiencing my children’s schools. My purpose in writing was to share with others the experiences I had, somewhat as a cautionary tale. The context around which my experiences were framed included: that education was a provincial responsibility in Canada; that we were part of the Canadian mining industry that required frequent uprooting of families; that we chose a variety of school types (French, English, Catholic, public) for our children; and that two of our children were eventually diagnosed as special needs by the K–12 system. The central question for this study was to identify phenomenologically the experience that a parent had of her children’s schools. The significance of the study was to interpret and understand that experience and to share that interpretation and understanding with others, especially teachers and other parents with similar challenges. The organization of the dissertation as a whole was provided at the end of Chapter One.
2.0 PARENT INVOLVEMENT, SATISFACTION AND EXPERIENCE AT SCHOOL: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Outline of Chapter Two

This chapter provides information on the ideas of educational researchers that would have been influencing schools (teachers and administrators) during the time that my children were in school. Interestingly, the time period from 1985 through 2004 was a time of a change in perspective. In the 20 years prior to this time period, society in North America had undergone radical change. Key amongst those changes was the fact that society changed from rural to urban. Society, in general, was beginning to digest the meaning of the first volley in the information explosion namely television. (Unbeknownst, the next volley was waiting in the wings, the Internet.) These factors influenced how schools organized themselves and their relationship with parents and other stakeholders.

At the beginning of the time period in which my narrative took place, parents and schools had been described as being worlds apart. As the period unfolded, however, evidence began to mount that parents should be involved in their children’s schools. Many researchers acknowledged that this was difficult for both teachers and parents. Toward the end of the period Joyce Epstein (2001) had produced her framework for parental involvement which I have outlined in this chapter.
This chapter also provides information on parents’ satisfaction with their children’s schools. Schools began to measure parental satisfaction as part of the quality movement. I present various findings that indicate that at least 70% of parents surveyed were satisfied with their children’s schools. The chapter provides a discussion of the somewhat limited literature on parent experience.

Further to this, the chapter provides a discussion on one of the outcomes of the parent involvement/satisfaction redefinition of roles which is the creation of Parent Advisory Councils. In addition, the chapter discusses involvement, satisfaction, and experience of parents of special needs children as this is relevant to my narrative. Finally, the chapter provides a review of the literature and thematic directions in the field of parent-school involvement subsequent to 2000 which contributes some interesting “rear-view mirror” (to use Marshal McLuhan’s expression, Bendetti and DeHart, 1997) insights into my narrative.

2.2 Parent Involvement

2.2.1 Worlds Apart

It seemed logical to begin this literature review around the time that my children started school, that is to say the early 1980s. What were educators thinking at that time? Did they think parents should be involved in some way in their children’s schools? What reason was there for parent involvement? Should I have expected the red carpet to be rolled out, or should I have expected to mind my own business as my parents had? I began the literature review with Sara Lightfoot’s 1979 book Worlds Apart. The title seemed perfect as my narrative described worlds apart. I was even encouraged by the
title of chapter five, “Looking Beyond Fences”, as I thought of that first moment of 
experiencing school as a parent as I stood beside the chain link fence; Eldest Son, not 
needing his mother, skipping through the school door, Middle Son prattling and cooing in 
the stroller, and Ballou alternating between licking my hand and Middle Son’s face, 
anxious to move her charges along. I was going to say that I was disappointed but that 
was too strong a judgement. Instead, I will say there were parts of Lightfoot’s analysis 
that resonated for me and were supported in my narrative or that I was able to validate by 
other experiences, while other parts of the book remained alien to me and my experience.

In the first instance Lightfoot used structural functionalism as her theoretical 
framework seeing parent-school relationships primarily and systemically as adversarial. 
Mothers, she ventured, see teachers as the other woman in their child’s life. She argued 
that mothers had more time on their hands because of advancements in the technologies 
of housekeeping and so “tortured” (my word) the schools with over-concern for their 
children. At least that was the way she saw it for middle-class mothers; for ethnic or poor 
mothers, the roles reversed and the schools saw them as not part of the dominant 
discourse, shutting them out of schools. In any case, according to Lightfoot, there were 
structural reasons why schools and parents were naturally worlds apart. For the most part 
I did not see myself in Lightfoot’s analysis. For one thing, I was a working mother who 
did not have spare time on my hands to torture the school. My experience was more of 
being shut out than of wanting to be over-involved.

However, from a strictly professional perspective, I agreed with Lightfoot’s 
analysis in that when we received students at university, who probably started school in
about 1979, we noted the phenomenon of helicopter mothers (hovering over their adult child, capable of landing anytime, anywhere, and relentlessly advocating on behalf of their child) (Cline and Fay, 1990). I remembered one mother phoned me and five other administrators at various levels in the University every day for a week until the closet rod in her daughter’s residence room was repaired to her satisfaction (the mother’s, not the daughter’s). Perhaps this mother tortured the school in 1979 in the way Lightfoot described. In any case, I suspected Lightfoot’s analysis of worlds apart did describe the condition of parent-school relations at the beginning of the 1980s, whether the reasons were precisely as she saw them or not.

As already mentioned, many others supported this view of apartness: Comer (1986), Epstein and Becker (1982), Moles (1982), and Seeley (1989).

2.2.2 The Evidence Grows

At the same time, the research began to indicate that if this was the state of affairs at the beginning of the 1980s, it was not helpful to the learning enterprise. Anne Henderson, in 1981, compiled an annotated bibliography, The Evidence Grows. In it, she cited 36 studies, mostly completed in the 1970s, indicating that parental involvement in almost any form improved student achievement. Shutting parents out was perhaps not the right thing after all. Many of the studies she cited were U.S. government funded and as a result assessed programmes that were specifically directed to the “disadvantaged”. As a result of this, there was also an over weighting of studies dealing with early preschool interventions such as “Head Start” and other programmes that were funded by US central governments. I point this out because it may, in part, explain the origins of some of the
practices that I was subjected to as a parent and for the most part found invasive and offensive. To put it bluntly, the techniques that I was being subjected to were meant to have me adopt techniques of the white suburban middle class. The problem was, however, that I was already white and middle-class and, at the same time, rural, small town, and isolated.

In the literature around parental involvement and academic achievement, many of the studies reported improved academic results because of parental involvement. Rankin (1967) (cited in Henderson, 1981) studied high-performing disadvantaged children and found they had more involved parents. Madill, Rigsby, and Meyers (1969) (cited in Henderson, 1981) found in a large US national study that parental involvement was found to be a critical factor in the achievement and aspiration of high school students. Bronfenbrenner (1974), Mowry (1972) (cited in Henderson, 1981), and Wilmon (1969) measured parental involvement and early intervention impacts on the disadvantaged. Kraracker (1972) saw improvement in mathematics skills in grade two students when their parents rewarded them for performance. Goodson and Hess (1975) (cited in Henderson, 1981) and Radin (1972) studied the effects of training disadvantaged parents of preschoolers. Stearns and Petersen (1973) (cited in Henderson, 1981) used federal studies and found a link between parent involvement as tutors and trainers on IQ scores. Armour, Conry-Oseguera, Cox, King, McDonnell, Pascal, Pauly, and Zellman (1976) studied grade six in 20 elementary schools with low income minority students in Los Angeles and found that the more thorough the schools’ efforts to have parents participate in school decision making, the better the students did. Gallager (1976) (cited in Henderson, 1981) studied the impact of developing the parent’s educational role at

At the beginning of the 1980s, if parents and schools were worlds apart, there was also mounting quantitative or quasi-quantitative (in the tradition of the social sciences) evidence that student achievement was enhanced by parent involvement. Much of the research emerged from the US federal system and was mainly focused on the disadvantaged.
2.2.3 The Evidence Continues to Grow

In 1987, Henderson provided an update to her earlier study, entitled *The Evidence Continues to Grow*. One immediate noticeable difference in this updated edition was that the language of the “disadvantaged” was dropped in favour of “at risk.” She began the report by listing the benefits of parent involvement: higher grades and test scores, long term academic achievement, positive attitudes and behaviour, more successful programs, and more effective schools (Henderson, 1987). She categorized the research into three approaches to parental involvement: the parent/child approach, the school/programme approach, and the community approach. The involvement of parents regardless of the approach though “must be intimate and deep not just public relations, one-way communications or dog and pony shows” (Henderson, 1987, p.1). It must be comprehensive, long-lasting, and well-planned.

Research of the 1980s on school-parent involvement generally turned to techniques of involvement although some studies still concentrated on continuing to mount the evidence of positive impacts. There was, however, a perceptible shift that cast scrutiny on the parents and the home environment. Walberg, Bole, and Waxman (1980) studied the response of parents and teachers of grade 1–6 students to a city-wide programme aimed at helping parents create academic support conditions in the home, the more intensive the response the greater the gain in reading comprehension. Revicki (1981) saw a positive interrelationship between parent involvement and student scores on standardized tests in 321 grade two children. Evans and Bass (1982) observed that many parents believed education was best left to educators. Herwig (1982) observed that communications problems between parents and teachers were the result of stresses
between families and schools; these stresses included subtle competition between parents and teacher, parents' viewpoint of teacher as critic of their parenting skills and disparity in cultural background, education, and socioeconomic level. Johnston (1982) urged teachers to re-examine their perception about parents. Olmsted and Rubin (1982) studied the impact of parental training and found that it improved the parents' teaching behaviour at home. Tizard, Schofield, and Hewison (1982) studied six schools in London and saw improvements in 5-, 6-, 7-, and 8-year-olds' reading skills when reading was practiced at home. Clark (1983) studied 10 poor black families and found that family cultural style was a main determinant of competent performance at school. Leler (1983) reviewed 48 educational programmes and concluded that the fuller the parent participation the more effective the results. Becher (1984) demonstrated the ways parents can be trained to improve their children's achievement. Williams (1984) reported that educators supported parent involvement but not governance and felt that parents needed instruction for involvement of any kind. Bloom (1985) studied talented young professionals and showed the most common characteristic of their education was enthusiastic parent involvement. Phillips, Smith, and Witte (1985) (cited in Henderson, 1987) studied 22 school districts in Milwaukee and found parental involvement was associated with higher school performance regardless of income, location, or grade in school. Cochran and Henderson (1986) studied a family-oriented early childhood intervention that produced positive effects in student achievement. Dornbusch (1986) saw that family behaviour patterns influenced grades and that parent attendance at school events was strongly linked to better grades. Schiamberg and Chun (1986) (cited in Henderson, 1987) completed a 14-

10 The vignettes 'Rolling in the Mud' and 'Snow Pants and Lunches' provide the circumstances in which a principal openly and a teacher not so openly criticized my parenting skills.
year longitudinal study in rural low income youth and concluded that family made
significant contributions to the attainment of educational goals. Toomey’s (1986) (cited
in Henderson, 1987) Australian study observed that programmes to encourage parent
involvement in reading skills were successful and were even more successful if parents
had a higher level of contact with the school. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) compared
Catholic and public schools and speculated that the critical difference was in the
relationships of schools to community.11 Dorunbursch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, and
Fraleigh (1987) found significant relationships between parenting style and student
grades in San Francisco high schoolers. Epstein (1987) studied teachers’ practices of
parent involvement and concluded that teacher leadership in parent involvement
influenced change in reading achievement. Atkin and Bastiani (1988) identified the
diversity of parental views on the purpose of schooling, their own role as educators, and
the boundaries between home and school; further they identified possible courses of
action for professionals and policy makers. Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, and Ecob
(1988) concluded that parent involvement in the schools they studied had a positive
influence upon pupils’ progress and development.

The 1980s took parent involvement from being something that was generally
positive to the beginning of speculation as to what it might look like. Henderson wrote in
her introduction to The Evidence Continues to Grow that she misnamed the update. She
observed that the evidence was beyond dispute: parent involvement improved student
achievement. But what form should parent involvement take? This was the question that
hung over the beginning of the 1990s.

11 See the vignette ‘A Sense of Community’ for my narrative view of this observation.
2.2.4 Beyond Dispute

Joyce Epstein provided the answer. By the 1990s Joyce Epstein emerged as the leading researcher in the field of school and family interactions. She developed a model of overlapping spheres of influence for school, family, and community partnerships. Her model was based on the assumption that the main reasons for such partnerships were children’s learning and success (Epstein 1983, 1991, 1992, 1996, and 2001). Epstein (1990, 1995, and 1996) emphasized the importance of the integration of school and family. Epstein demonstrated that interaction between families and schools enhanced student achievement. She encouraged families to get involved in their children’s school. Her model was developed because of research she did on elementary school parent involvement practices (Epstein, 1996). She encouraged schools to be comprehensive in their view of children’s learning. Her final model included six types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, supporting the school, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. She provided techniques for both parents and teachers to encourage these types of involvement (Epstein, 1996).

In a partnership, Saunders, Epstein, and Connors-Tadros (1999) used the model and the typology to investigate parental perspectives of high school family interactions in six Maryland high schools. The study concluded that when schools develop partnerships that included practices for different types of parental involvement, families responded favourably.

Others followed on the work of Joyce Epstein. In 1997, Patrikakou developed a slightly modified model and concluded that parental attitudes can have a significant
effect on the academic achievements of high school students. Canadians Deslandres, Royer, Turcotte, and Bertrand (1997) applied Epstein's overlapping spheres (school, family, and community) model on level III or grade nine students in a sample of Quebec schools. They included not only parental involvement in their study but also parenting style. They concluded that students who perceived their parents to be firm, warm, involved, and democratic performed better in school. Further, they found that a factor labelled "communication" with teachers showed a negative relationship with school grades. Although Deslandres et al. found this result troubling it was in fact a result that had been previously reported by Baker and Stevenson (1986). Epstein (1996) said that this correlation did not suggest that more contact brought about lower grades, but implied that families were more likely to contact the school when there was a problem with the academic programme.

Others concurrently investigated this phenomenon. Comer and Haynes (1991) noted that meaningful involvement of parents enhanced the educational process. D'Angelo and Adler (1991) identified effective parental programmes as ones in which there was face-to-face communications; that tapped technology; that relied on the written word; and ones where good news was consciously communicated.

Davies (1991) urged new definitions for parents and schools. He considered families, not parents, community agencies, and activities and services delivered in the

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12 I note that my experience is that teachers (the school) have plenty of communications with you when the child is not doing well or is problematic in other ways. This result is not troubling in the world of lived experience, but rather expected.
home. Olmsted (1991) observed three areas of positive outcome for parental involvement in advocacy, decision making, and instruction. Hickman, Greenwood, and Miller (1995) also looked at the relationship between high school achievement and the involvement of the primary care parent where involvement was identified and scored on themes identified as: home-based; communicator; supporter; learner; advocate; decision maker; and volunteer. This was a random sample selected from a specific county in Florida. In general, the study produced a curvilinear relationship and concluded that the higher the parents score, the higher the child’s grade point average. However, not all the factors yielded positive correlations. For example, there was no correlation between parent as volunteer and grade point average. The curvilinear relationship that this study produced was somewhat worrisome. Average and low GPA students with uninvolved parents seemed to be paying double the price. Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, and Killings (1998) completed a longitudinal study with US nationally available data that looked at parent involvement defined as parental expectations and aspirations and parent-school communications and effects on grade point on students also categorized by ethnicity and gender. The study concluded that parent involvement was an important influence on grade point average across all groups.

The evidence was beyond dispute that parental involvement and interaction with the school was critical to academic achievement of children. Deciding on precisely what involvement should look like was left to the next decade.

13 Although he mentions concern for the deficit views of parents held by educators I have to wonder about the depth of his understanding when home visits are mentioned. I and, I am sure, almost any minority, disadvantaged, or at risk parent, would interpret home visiting as spying and being checked up on. I refer the reader forward to Richard Rodriguez’s description of the visit of the nuns and his determined view of the necessity of maintenance of the public and private world in Chapter Four.
I conclude, sometime during the time that my children were in school, that educators began to believe that parents should significantly be involved in their children’s schools and not just volunteering to sell hot dogs. At what moment in time, if at all, this type of involvement became welcomed in Canadian schools I am not sure. There is certainly a lag between research and action in classrooms, but suffice it to say that sometime during this time, schools began to welcome parents, at least some parents.

2.2.5 Ordinary Families, Special Children

There has also been much research on the role of parents in the education of children with special needs. Harry (1992) studied 12 low income Puerto Rican families with children labelled as learning disabled and found that different cultural meanings caused parents to reject the notion of disability. Leff and Walizer (1992) identified that parental concerns seemed to result in certain feelings or emotions: vulnerability, guilt, and isolation. Green and Shinn (1995) identified that parents were meant to play a role as advocates for their children. However, the literature also showed that most parents admit that they did not play an active role. Green and Shinn (1995) also reported that one-third of parents involved in their survey did not attend any school conferences at all. Feelings of inferiority and other emotions of parents with special needs children led to their varying levels of involvement. Hornby (1995) stressed that school professionals should be mindful of parents’ feelings. Developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) caused tension and anxiety for parents. Masino and Hodapp (1996) researched a national

\[14\] This resonates with my experience.
sample of grade eight students with disabilities and found that parental expectations were influenced by parent education, race, and previous school performance for students with and without disabilities. Harry (1997) observed that the greatest conflict occurred when dealing with families that looked different than the educator. He observed when disputes arose the families were assumed to be in denial about the child’s disability when, perhaps, it was just a genuine disagreement or different beliefs about disabilities.

Within the context of family systems theory, Seligman and Darling (1997) examined the roles and points of views of both professionals and parents and the interaction between the two as they related to children attending special education and diagnosed as disabled. They found that sharing between the two groups and parents sharing with each other should be encouraged. Coots (1998) researched 35 families with 7- and 8-year-olds classified as special needs and found that parent participation was influenced by information resources provided and school characteristics. Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, and Widaman (1998) studied parents’ perception of the “new” trend of inclusion and found that parents were positive about the impact of inclusion on social benefits, but apprehensive about the quality of education. Sileo and Prater (1998) researched barriers to parents’ involvement in their child’s special education. Their main finding was that parents were not involved if the school was not comfortable with them being involved. Other barriers included: English proficiency; being a member of minority race or culture; and the number of negative experiences that the parents had already had. Hallahan and Kauffman (2000) recommended a family-centered model for educational intervention, noting that professionals should conceive of themselves as working for (italics theirs) the family and looking for ways to increase the decision making power of
the family. Smith (2001) listed barriers to parental participation in specifically the Individualized Educational Plan process: communication problems; lack of understanding of the school system; lack of knowledge of their child’s disability; and feelings of inferiority.

If the parents were anxious so were the teachers. Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) indicated that teachers found interacting with parents to be a major area of stress in their jobs. Dietz (1997) provided information to schools on how appropriate parental communication might take place. Hornby (2000) identified five methods of communication between parents and schools: informal contacts, telephone contacts, written communications, parent-teacher meetings, and home visits. Fuller and Olsen (1998) worried that communication for the most part was one-way and that teachers needed to learn two-way communication with parents.

As indicated by the above-mentioned studies, the literature here too was clear. Just as parents of normal students should be involved, parents of children with special needs ought to be involved in their children’s education. There were many barriers, probably even more than for the abled. The schools were not always welcoming; the teachers found the interaction stressful; and the parents experienced emotions that were not conducive to communication. Yet for the good of the child, interaction between parent and school should take place.

2.3 Parent Satisfaction

If parents were to be involved and the schools were to generally promote parent involvement over this period (from 1985 to 2004, the 19-year period that I was
interested in) did the parents experience a sense of satisfaction with their involvement? Interestingly, the question of parent satisfaction was in part linked to the quality movement of the mid- to late nineties. The quality movement was in large part based on the work of Edward Deming (1982) and was adapted to many settings including the not for profit sector, schools, and universities. Tuck (1995) identified five areas of parent satisfaction: quality of staff, school climate, academic programme, social development including extracurricular activities, and parent involvement. Griffith (1997) found parents were satisfied when they scored the school highly on school climate, school-parent communications, and empowerment of parents. Salisbury, Branson, Altreche, Funk, and Broetzmann (1997) considered that improving parent satisfaction was a way to improve the quality of schools. Further they concluded that certain physical aspects of the school also had an impact on parent satisfaction including teachers, transportation, and cafeteria food. They identified other impacts on satisfaction (mainly adapted from the quality literature) as being truly caring, being informed, and having input valued. Olson (1999) observed that meeting the expectations of parents was important for creating satisfaction. This too is consistent with the quality movement. Carnevale and Desrochers (1999) noted that cultural background played a role in the setting of parental expectations and therefore subsequent satisfaction.

Based on the above literature, parent satisfaction became the purview of school districts which, consistent with Total Quality Management (TQM) practice, began to survey their customers. For the most part questionnaires were administered through sac à dos/school bags/book bags/back packs. Concerned that these might have had sampling bias, many districts attempted other sampling methods. As already mentioned
the Ministry of Education in British Columbia commissioned a random sample phone
survey completed by MacIntyre and Mustel in 2002. They reported that 77% of parents
were satisfied. Falbo, Glover, Stokes, Holcombe, Lee, Inchauste, Provost, and
Schexnayder, (2003) completed a study of parent satisfaction in Austin, Texas. Their
methodology of phoning selected households was meant to provide information about
specific groups as well as to be more balanced than the surveys using self-selected
respondents administered through back packs. Although they observed differences
depending on ethnicity, income level, and grade of student, overall they found that 73%
of parents were generally satisfied. In 2005, the Office of Standards in Education in the
UK reported similar findings for primary schools with 84% of parents being satisfied
with the quality of the linkages between schools and parents and 69% of parents with
students in secondary schools being satisfied. As in the American studies, they found
differences in satisfaction across economic and ethnic groups and dependency on the
success of individual students.

I looked at the annual results as well in two of the Canadian provinces where
my children went to school—British Columbia and Newfoundland. British Columbia
does survey parents annually, through surveys delivered to the home in back packs. I
decided to look at the report for 2004—the last year I had children in the system
(Information Department, 2004). The questionnaire involved 25 questions which could be
categorized as fitting into Salisbury et al.'s indicators. Parents were asked to rate
disagreement or agreement on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is strong agreement). Across all
questions, secondary school parents rated satisfaction at 3.58 or 71.61% satisfied. It is
interesting to note, however, that the single question which yielded a less than 2.5 score
or less than 50% was: Do you volunteer at your child’s school? The Mean Scores for items on the Parent Questionnaires are shown in the table below:

### 2.3.1 Table Mean Scores of Parent Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with child's learning?</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do staff treat all students fairly?</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do teachers help with homework?</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child learning good health habits?</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with reading skills?</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with writing skills?</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with math skills?</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your child use computers at school?</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your child get exercise at school?</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child learns to respect differences?</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child participates in outside activities?</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your child feel safe at school?</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your child bullied, teased, picked on?*</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are expectations for behaviour clear?</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent enforcement of rules?</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do teachers care about your child?</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you welcome at the school?</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with report cards?</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in decisions that affect child?</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in school planning activities?</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you volunteer at your child's school?</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with program choices?</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know the schools' goals for learning?</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with work preparation?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with post-sec preparation?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*This item was reverse-scaled.
The Newfoundland government does not survey parents but only grade twelve students for satisfaction. In 2000/2001 only 53.7% of grade twelve Newfoundland students in the Senior High School category (the high school that Eldest Son attended was in this category) indicated that they were satisfied with their school (Department of Education, 2004).

It appeared that it was safe to say that at least 70% of parents surveyed across various jurisdictions through more or less common indicators were reasonably satisfied with their children’s schools if the parents were asked for their views. There was variation across elementary or secondary and ethnicity and socioeconomic class but for the most part, the majority of parents were satisfied with their children’s schools.

I wondered if it was different for special needs parents.

Leiter and Krauss (2004) reported on a 2002 study that showed that 70% of special needs parents surveyed in the US thought that their children lost out because the parents did not know enough about programmes available. I assumed then that 30% were broadly satisfied. The same study reported that 43% believed they had to stay on top of the school and fight for services for their children, implying 57% were satisfied. Also 35% of parents found it frustrating to obtain services for their children; again implying 65% were satisfied or at least not frustrated. I noted, however, that Leiter and Krauss’s own 2004 data indicated that 83% of special needs parents were satisfied with their children’s educational services, not necessarily with their children’s schools but with the services being provided. Their information was supported by Newman’s 2005 report (based on 2000-2001 data) Facts from OSEP’s Longitudinal Study: Parents’ Satisfaction.
with Their Children's Schooling. Newman reported that the information which fed her article was “the first nationally representative information about the satisfaction of parents of students with disabilities with their children’s education, services, teachers and schools” (p. 1). I noted that she quoted only one other study that was more or less on this topic, Johnson and Duffett, (2002). Newman’s broad results are shown in the table below.

### 2.3.2 Parents' Satisfaction with the Schooling of Their Children with Disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction with student's school for:</th>
<th>6- to 13-year-olds</th>
<th>13- to 17-year-olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall education for:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with overall education for:</td>
<td>6- to 13-year-olds</td>
<td>13- to 17-year-olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with teachers for:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with amount of information school provides parents about student’s behavior and academic performance for:</td>
<td>6- to 13-year-olds</td>
<td>13- to 17-year-olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with special education services received by student for:</td>
<td>6- to 13-year-olds</td>
<td>13- to 17-year-olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I began to sense that I lived life in the tail. Satisfaction was a typical bell curve, where probably 20% of parents were thrilled and delighted with their children’s
schools, another 60% were somewhere between thrilled and delighted and just barely satisfied, and finally 20%, maybe as high as 30%, were in the tail, dissatisfied.

2.4 Parent Experience

There was some literature on parent experience that touched my question about what was parents’ experience of their children’s schools like? For the most part, the research, that is, parents’ experience, was depicted in narrative form such as my own.

Some dissertations that were relevant to the issue included Maria Margarida Moniz Aguiar (2001) *Childhood, Schooling, Family, and Community: Reflections of Mothers* and Heather Raymond (2002) *A Narrative Inquiry into Mothers’ Experience of Securing Inclusive Education*. These were different from my narrative in as much they were reports on the experiences of others, and not self reports.

Raymond (2002) noted that she was awakened to the resistance that parents encountered and the complexities of understanding about what was best for their children from the parents’ perspective. In her abstract she said, “The narratives of experience also foregrounded the dominant social narrative on school landscapes which shaped and resisted these mothers’ personal practical knowledge” (Raymond 2002, Abstract). She identified four themes in her work: 1. What counts as knowledge? Whose knowledge counts?; 2. School transitions; 3. The gazes of others; and 4. Advocacy. Some of Raymond’s (2002) themes were reflected in my narrative. Aguiar (2001) noted that for the most part the mothers in her project had positive school involvement experiences, even the two mothers who had special needs children. She noted that these mothers were quite involved with their children’s schools seeing such involvement as their
responsibility and also seeing involvement as an opportunity to keep an eye on the school. When I read Aguiar's work I saw mothers who were more in tune with the schools than I was. Against difficult odds, they participated more than I did. Her mothers also viewed the teachers more sympathetically than I did. Aguiar's mothers were similar to the mothers discussed in Whitmore and Norton-Meier's (2008) article, hesitant at first because of their own histories but eventually were able to feel validated in the academic and social culture of school.

2.5 Realities of Participation: Partnership of Promise or Hollow Words?

By the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, we saw a revised approach with the creation of Parent Advisory Councils (PAC)—a genuine attempt to put parents back in schools. It was clear evidence, at least, that the parent involvement literature had taken hold. Lareau (1989) pointed out, however, that these efforts attempted to duplicate middle-class values for everyone and she worried about the appropriateness of this. PACs were conceived of as a way of routinizing consultation. The advent of PACs was the one major structural change that took place during the period of my narrative. There was a PAC at the time Daughter was in the neighbourhood school in the Interior. But to be honest I do not remember once being advised of a meeting or being asked to join or even someone explaining to me what the Parent Advisory Council was.

Benson (1997), Collins (1995, 1996), and Downer (1995) all provided information and a review of the Canadian context of PACs. As with all things Canadian and education, it depended on where in the country one was located. In British Columbia, the only province where my children were in school when PACs came into existence, the
PACs were strictly advisory bodies, although as Benson (1997) pointed out, the definition of advisory differed from school board to school board. All of Benson (1997), Collins (1995, 1996), and Downer's (1995) (educators themselves) research reported great potential in the PAC movement. Perhaps PACs have been in existence long enough now for judgement to be made as to whether or not they have altered the parental experience of school.

Where to now? I do not know. I know that my parent-school experience was unsatisfactory. I know that parents should be involved in their children's schools; the literature was clear. I wanted always to go into my children's classrooms and tell their teacher that my children were special people with strengths and weaknesses and here was what I as their mother knew about them. I wanted to be respected and treated as if that knowledge mattered. I wanted the teacher to take that knowledge and understand my children better. I hoped that those things would improve their academic achievement however defined. Was that too much to ask? I asked myself too, would a PAC have achieved this?

2.6 The Next Decade, 2000 and Beyond

Although my children were basically finished (as mentioned Middle Son graduated from high school in 2002 and Daughter in 2004 and I did not enter a school building after 2002) the research of the subsequent decade developed around three distinct issues. The first was the continued mounting evidence of the benefits of parent involvement in schools. In general, the discourse of the previous decade was reinforced. Anne Henderson together with Karen Mapp issued a 2002 report titled A New Wave of
Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement. This document reported on 51 studies that supported the notion that parent involvement improved academic achievement. One of the studies quoted was Mapp's own 2003 study that examined the factors that influenced parent's participation in a Boston elementary school. A similar study was Pena's (2000) that looked at what factors influenced Mexican American parents' involvement in a Texas urban elementary school. Shumow and Miller (2001) examined the impact of parent involvement in 60 families at the middle school level finding that positive attitudes toward school and higher grades resulted.

At the same time the literature began to look significantly beyond parents and to examine the issue of community involvement in schools and the phrase "community partnerships" started to appear. An example of this literature was Saunders and Harvey (2000, cited in Henderson and Mapp, 2002 ) who conducted a case study of how one urban elementary school was able to develop strong connections with community organizations. Lopez (2003) provided a 23-item bibliography on community organizing. The study was updated in 2005 in partnership with Krieder and Coffman in which an additional 52 articles were referenced. Arriaza's (2004) article argued that school reform initiatives, particularly those aiming at high schools, had greater chances of success when the community actively participated as an empowered change agent. This notion of community involvement mapped onto the satisfaction and quality notions of the previous decade. It was a relatively short journey from customer satisfaction to inviting in the community (teachers, the neighbourhood, the corporate world and non-school community organization).
The third issue, as already mentioned, and raised primarily by Annette Lareau (1989, 1999) but others as well (e.g. Abrams and Gibbs, 2002; Cooper and Christie, 2005) was the issue of parent involvement pressure that tried to force replication of the conditions of the middle class on all parents. Many studies involved the “training of parents” particularly the “disadvantaged” and “at risk”. The dominant discourse, to use Kainz and Aikens’ (2007) terminology, was being imposed on everyone “…a dominant discourse on parent involvement obscures diversity in viewpoints, family structure and resources for expected home/school relations” (p.302).

This last issue has caused me to think more deeply about my experiences. I think now there were a number of things going on that I did not realize at the time. First, I believe that it may be true that my “look” caused me to be judged as not middle-class and so I received treatment usually reserved for the “disadvantaged” or “at risk”\textsuperscript{16}. This may have been reinforced by the itinerant nature of our lives. I think again of Raymond’s (2002) theme of “the gaze of others.” Treatments meant for “them” were given to me and I was critical of these treatments because they felt like they did not fit, but the truth was they probably did not fit for “them” either. Further, we did not truly have typical middle-class culture within the bounds of our family because of the presence of an A.D.D. child; our culture was unique.\textsuperscript{17} It was not understood by the schools; rather they tried to convert us (me, my children) to middle-class/normal. It was impossible. I wondered how many other disadvantaged/at risk families suffered the same fate. What I knew was this: there was no point in having me sign a document saying that Middle Son did his

\textsuperscript{16} This is discussed in depth in Chapter Six under the theme of Otherness.
\textsuperscript{17} This is discussed in depth in Chapter Six under the theme of Cultural Dissonance.
homework or that I was taking responsibility for him doing his homework. He didn’t, wouldn’t, and couldn’t. The only thing that signing did was make me feel inadequate and caused another point of friction between me and him, and me and the school.\textsuperscript{18} It was not until I completed the literature review that there was even a hint of understanding of this. The rest added more guilt and more remorse.

\textbf{2.7 Summary of Chapter Two}

The object of the literature review was to provide interpretation and understanding of the narrative. This literature review covered three topics related to my narrative: parent involvement, satisfaction, and experience. The literature identified roles for parents: governance, supervision of homework, volunteerism, assisting in the classroom, and contracting with the parents a role in the performance of homework, and reinforcing behaviour expectations at school in the home. If these were the roles parents could play by the beginning of the 1980s they were not necessarily the roles they were playing. The decade began with parents and schools being worlds apart. As the decade proceeded there was very clear evidence based on studies that were US federally funded, for the most part, and involved the disadvantaged or the at risk, that parents being involved in their children’s schools taking on any of the roles identified above increased student success at school. In the 1990s, we saw how schools attempted to encourage parents to be involved, culminating with Joyce Epstein’s Framework of Involvement which addressed both parents and teachers. What was true for normal students was also considered to be true for special needs students. However, despite the barriers for special needs parents being greater, involvement was at least, if not more, necessary. In the

\textsuperscript{18} This is identified in Chapter Five in the vignette ‘Snow Pants and Lunches’. 
2000s the view of involvement was reinforced and broadened to include community. However, by the middle of the decade the question of imposing the values of the dominant discourse through the acceptance of the parent involvement thesis was beginning to be raised.

By the end of the 1990s, mostly due to the application of quality theory to all different kinds of public institutions, schools became concerned about parent satisfaction. Across a number of political jurisdictions, for the most part, somewhere between 70% and 80% of parents were generally satisfied with their children’s school. The data were basically the same for special needs students. Parents may have been involved in their children’s schools and may have been relatively satisfied with it, but on the whole the question remains: What does the parent actually experience? My narrative in Chapter Five contributed to the discussion of this question.
3.0 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Outline of Chapter Three

This chapter first outlines the conceptual framework of Max van Manen primarily as expressed in his book *Researching Lived Experience* (1990). I discuss van Manen’s mapping of his framework through the philosophical traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology. I present van Manen’s framework and indicate how it has been applied in future chapters of this dissertation.

3.2 Origins of Van Manen’s Framework

The following were van Manen’s (1990) understandings based on the glossary (pp. 175-187) and other material he provided in *Researching Lived Experience.*

“Phenomenology is the science of phenomena” (van Manen, 1990, p. 183). According to van Manen (1990), Husserl (1964) identified phenomenology as a “descriptive method as well as a human science movement that was based on modes of reflection” (p.183). For him phenomenology was “a discipline that attempted to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts” (van Manen, 1990, p.184).

Phenomenology described “what is given to us in immediate experience without being obstructed by pre-conceptions and theoretical notions” (van Manen, 1990, p.184).

Van Manen states that it was Husserl who formulated the notion of the lifeworld, “the everyday world in which we live in the natural, taken-for-granted state” (van Manen, 1990, p.184).
Van Manen reported that Schutz believed that a method for the descriptive analysis of the constitution of the world of everyday life in human experience was embedded in Husserl’s phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen, Schutz thought that what remained was to apply the phenomenological method to the social world. By looking at the structure of the lifeworld, Schutz made efforts at identifying and explicating the nature of social reality. Such concepts as everyday living and the stock of knowledge were explored in the context of Schutz’s account of the structures of the world as it appeared in everyday life (van Manen, 1990).

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, like Schutz’s, was oriented to lived experience, the human being in his/her body in the concrete world. "Phenomenology is the study of essences," said Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii quoted in van Manen, 1990, p. 185). This meant that phenomenology always asked the question of what was the nature or meaning of something. Merleau-Ponty pointed out that “the work of phenomenology is as painstaking as the work of artists” (quoted in van Manen, 1990, p.185). Phenomenology demanded re-learning to look at the world as it was met in immediate experience. Based on this read of Merleau-Ponty, van Manen said, “Phenomenology does not produce empirical or theoretical observations or accounts, instead, it offers accounts of experienced space, time, body, and human relation as we live them” (van Manen, 1990, p.185).

Van Manen identified that it was Schleiermacher who opened up the idea of hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation, especially with respect to the study of texts (van Manen, 1990). Said van Manen, “His aim was to understand an author as well or even better than he or she understood himself or herself” (van Manen, 1990, p.179).

Van Manen reported that Wilhelm Dilthey took up the search for a philosophical legitimating of the human sciences. The emphasis for Dilthey “was not the fundamental thought of the other person but the world itself, the ‘lived experience’ which is expressed by the author's text” (van Manen, 1990, p.180). According to van Manen, “Dilthey's hermeneutic formula is lived experience: the starting point and focus of human science; expression: the text or artefact as objectification of lived experience; and understanding not a cognitive act but the moment when ‘life understands itself’” (van Manen, 1990, p.180).

Van Manen indicated that Gadamer’s (1975) contribution was as follows:

…that in interpreting a text we cannot separate ourselves from the meaning of a text. The reader belongs to the text that he or she is reading. Understanding is always an interpretation, and an interpretation is always specific, an application (Gadamer, 1975, cited in van Manen, 1990, p.180).

…the problem of understanding involves interpretive dialogue which includes taking up the tradition in which one finds oneself. Texts that come to us from different traditions or conversational relations may be read as possible answers to questions (Gadamer, 1975, cited in van Manen, 1990, p.180).

To conduct a conversation...means to allow oneself to be animated by the question or notion to which the partners in the conversational relation are directed (Gadamer, 1975, cited in van Manen, 1990, p.180).
Finally, according to van Manen, Ricoeur widened “the notion of textuality to any human action or situation” (1990, p.180). “To interpret a social situation is to treat the situation as text and then to look for the metaphor that governs the text” (van Manen, 1990, p.180). Ricoeur tried “to articulate a methodological relationship between explanation and understanding in terms of the problem of distanciation and participation” (1976, pp. 71-88, quoted in van Manen, 1990, p.180).

Heidegger, van Manen allowed, blended the conventional notion of hermeneutics and phenomenology, as his form of hermeneutics was described as an interpretive phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). Thus, the final term in van Manen’s glossary that was adopted in this dissertation is “hermeneutic phenomenology”:

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a descriptive (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an interpretive (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) "facts" of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the "facts" of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process (van Manen, 1990, p.180).

It was with the above understandings drawn by van Manen (1990) of the philosophical works that I went forward with my project as a hermeneutically interpreted and understood phenomenological narrative. My narrative was appropriately identified as a phenomenology of the lifeworld as reported and interpreted by van Manen (1990). The question of what was the parent’s experience was consistent with this view of phenomenology, similar to asking the question of what was the nature or meaning of
something. I re-learned to look at my original experience. I interpreted and understood my texts. My narrative fitted the notion, as reported by van Manen (1990), of lived experience, expression (the narrative), and finally understanding. I did not separate myself from the text. And finally, at the same time I followed the notions of distancification and participation, the two tracked journey, both stepping away from my narrative and being embedded in it at the same time. I was further encouraged that my narrative fitted and was defensible for this present purpose in reading Writing in the Dark: Phenomenological Studies in Interpretive Inquiry, edited by Max van Manen (2002). I was able to identify enough similarities between my narrative and those presented in the work to see that my narrative fitted into van Manen’s framework which had evolved from his understandings as identified above. I was comfortable in understanding and accepting that hermeneutic phenomenology was a framework for inquiry through which a researcher funnelled or squeezed his or her research findings (van Manen, 1990).

3.3 Van Manen’s Framework

Van Manen (1990) presented a structure drawn from the works cited above that was practical and was applicable to hermeneutic phenomenological human science research. He provided six research activities for the purpose of eventually interpreting and understanding lived experiences. The six activities were intended to guide human science research. The six research activities were:

(1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
(2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
(3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
(4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
(5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
(6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 1990, pp. 30–31).

He did not advise a step by step linear research procedure but rather a structure that was flexible and open to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen the critical moments of inquiry were dependent on the interpretive sensitivity, inventive thoughtfulness, scholarly tact, and the writing talent of the human science researcher (van Manen, 1990).

3.3.1 Turning to the Phenomenon

Phenomenological research’s starting point according to van Manen (1990) was first, identification of what it was that deeply interested the researcher. Second, it was being able to conclude that the object of interest had the qualities of a true phenomenon. Third, what was of interest was some experience that human beings lived through.

The starting point of my phenomenological research of the lived experiences of a parent experiencing her children’s schools began, as already mentioned, on the walk with Ballou and company. I just did not know at the time that I was doing research; rather I was in the lifeworld living the experience. At first as Eldest Son went through the system the phenomenon was about miscommunications or lack of understanding on my part of the role to which parents were relegated. But it was when Middle Son entered the system that I experienced the phenomenon of parent-school interactions in a particular way that caused me to turn to the phenomenon of the experience the parent had with her children’s schools as a matter of interest.
When I entered the EdD programme I was clear on the topic that I was going to write about as a dissertation. Having been a senior university administrator for some 10 years at that point, I felt (others are free to disagree with this view, and I am sure will) that I knew something about post-secondary administration and leadership and that the doctoral programme would give me an opportunity to share some of that knowledge by forcing me to write it down. After the first course in the programme my ideas for a dissertation topic began to focus around the current issues, especially in the British Columbia context, of balancing accountability and autonomy of universities. I began to think perhaps I could do a cross-border comparison looking at funding models, key performance indicators, and accountability documents. Perhaps I could look at small comparable universities in a couple of Canadian provincial jurisdictions and a couple of U.S. jurisdictions. I could look at public and private universities in the U.S. as well. And then in the second course of the programme on research methodologies I was introduced to the notion of qualitative research.

To be honest, having completed an MBA in 1978, to that point I had never even heard about qualitative research. As we were preparing to write a preliminary draft of the first three chapters of a dissertation as the final paper for the course in research methods, I had a transformation. It began with a careful reading of Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography, edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986). You mean you could write something describing a human condition! I was stunned. Literally overnight, I changed from “Accountability and Autonomy of Universities: A Cross Border Comparison” to “Our Life at School: A Penguin’s Mother Finds Voice”.
In some ways, it was exposure to the K–12-oriented readings in the various courses I had taken as part of the educational leadership programme that caused me to move from discomfort with what had been my parent-school interactions to wanting to write about it and expose it to the world. Linda Darling-Hammond (1995, 1997); Gordon (1999); and Noddings (2003, 2005) were certainly authors that influenced me. I realized for the first time that there were people out there who thought that school should be better than what I experienced as a parent. They were not going as far as I was in thinking that teachers should be held accountable, but they did think at least that school should not be a horrible experience for parents and children. In the beginning, naively, I thought that my exploration of this phenomenon might spare others the agony. If “they” could just see what “they” had done to people (me, my children), “they” would stop doing it. In this way I turned to my experience of school as a phenomenon. It was a phenomenon that I cared deeply about.

Again, it was probably naivety, but I did not doubt for a minute that I could write a description so that the structure of a lived experience would be revealed. I believed that the reader would be able to grasp the nature and significance of the experience in a unique and revealing way. As van Manen (1990) wrote:

...a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is wholistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive (p. 39).

At the beginning, I was not prepared for the contrary or subsequent view, which has emerged from living with the narrative for some three years now. But perhaps
it was proof of the existence of the phenomenon and of the hermeneutic
phenomenological process that I had come to understand that I too bore responsibility for
the experience as much or more than the schools did. I believed I had come to this
understanding only because I was open to what was truly revealed when studying my
phenomenon. I became a phenomenologist who thought deeply about the meaning of a
lived experience. Phenomenology’s ultimate aim was the “fulfillment of our human
nature: to become more fully who we are” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). By doing a
phenomenological study, I interpreted and understood my lived experience through a
number of different dimensions. I experienced how hermeneutic phenomenology
revealed understandings. I was satisfied that I had identified a phenomenon that
interested me greatly, that it was a discernible phenomenon and that it was a lifeworld
experience that we, my children and I, as human beings, lived through.

3.3.2 Investigating Experience as We Live It

Van Manen (1990) suggested using personal experience as a starting point for
investigating a phenomenon. A phenomenologist who shared his/her own experiences
acknowledged that they were also the possible experiences of others. Further, it was well
known that the sharing of biographical details of one’s life helped to bind others to the
sharer (Denning, 2001, 2005). I did not expect this of my readers but acknowledged that
it might be a consequence. If it was, then I hoped that my readers would have some
insight into my feelings and emotions surrounding my experiences and this phenomenon.
Hopefully, it would help them in not only interpreting and understanding my narrative
but inform them as they considered their own experiences.
There was no doubt that my narrative was first person experience as I lived it. The fact that it was written naively before any consideration of a conceptual framework and that I have resisted changing it ensured that it was raw data unfettered or polluted by theoretical abstractions or models or knowledge. In order to preserve the narrative, I have resisted the temptation to “revise” it by either adding or deleting parts of it. I lived it perhaps, now looking back, not thinking enough about what it meant. What lens would have helped me understand it better? Why did this happen to me? I had no answers as I lived it. Although I had both an undergraduate degree and a professional graduate degree, I had no training in psychology, sociology, or education. Knowledge of these disciplines might have caused me to be more reflective in the lived experience stage of this study.

The writing stage did not take me much further. I did not think about techniques or theories in the writing. I merely wrote about what I remembered. Although I was not able to assure that every word written on paper was one hundred percent accurate according to everyone’s perspective that might have been involved in the incident; I was one hundred percent sure that every incident related did tell how I experienced the phenomenon of interacting with my children’s schools. I have exposed the narrative to my three children and other than a very minor correction (which I acknowledge in the narrative) they did not dispute any substantive facts. I hoped that readers would grasp the fundamental life experiences I have shared.

3.3.3 Reflecting on Essential Themes

I identified various themes revealed by this narrative in Chapter Six of the dissertation. The identification of themes aided interpretation and understanding of the narrative. The themes provided focus to the significant or consistent factors in the data.
According to van Manen, (1990), "The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something" (p. 77). The process of identifying phenomenological themes was not precise. It required sensitivity, and openness for appreciating what might be revealed. As van Manen (1990) writes:

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure—grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of "seeing" meaning (p. 79).

Further, for van Manen (1990), a theme was the experience of meaning, a simplification of the summary of the significant factor. In his view the themes would not be encountered as obvious objects in the data. Rather the identification of themes was a way of revealing the phenomenon. In terms of how a theme related to the phenomenon, the theme was the means to get at the core or essence, gave shape to the shapeless, described the content of the core, and yet it must be understood, and was always a reduction of the core (van Manen, 1990). “Phenomenological themes ... are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90). Themes guided such that a deeper, more comprehensive insight was attained (van Manen, 1990).

As I reflected on my lived experiences as a parent, I grasped for the essence of my experiences. The essence was multi-dimensional with many layers. In order to come to grips with the layers and the meanings of the text, I thought of the phenomenon in terms of themes. I tried to reflect on the thematic aspects of my lived experience. Van
Manen (1990) suggested three approaches that could be used to recognize significant themes. In the wholistic approach, the researcher attended to the task as a whole asking, “What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?” (p. 93). In Chapter Six I explained the technique of creating a stanza of essence, multilayered as suggested above, that I used as a wholistic approach to assist in the identification of themes. Essence from a phenomenological perspective had its origins in the phenomenological notion of bracketing, sometimes referred to as reduction. Said van Manen of the process of bracketing or reduction “[O]ne needs to see past or through the particularity of lived experience toward the universal, essence or *eidos* that lies on the other side of the concreteness of lived meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p.185). The process that I went through to establish the essence of my narrative, analyzing the base act of children being sent to school, was consistent with this notion of phenomenological bracketing.

In the selective reading approach, the researcher listens and reads the text several times to ask, “What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). It was here, with the aid of the wholistic approach and listening and reading for essential statements that I have selected themes. Finally, in the detailed reading approach, the researcher looked at every sentence or sentence cluster asking, “What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). I concentrated on adjectives and adverbs and

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19 I recognize that the normal spelling of holistic is that it begins with a ‘h”; however, as van Manen spells it ‘wholistic”, I will adopt this spelling.
active or passive verbs. I used all three approaches to bring out essential themes from my narrative.

Determining which themes were appropriate and maintaining the true meaning of the phenomenon was difficult. To help determine whether a theme was incidental or essential, van Manen (1990) shared the following:

*In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is… Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon? (p. 107).*

I explained how I identified the themes in Chapter Six, however I believed it would be useful for the reader if I shared those themes at this point so that the reader can look for them or others when reading the narrative itself which appeared as Chapter Five. Many of these themes were directly or indirectly identified in the involvement, satisfaction, and experience literature that was presented in Chapter Two. As I identified the theme I referred to the literature that also identified that this was a theme in the parent-school interface.

The first theme I identified was *Communications*. There were many misunderstandings between my children’s schools and me. It was not clear to me what they meant and I did not ask a lot of questions nor was I offered detailed explanations. Many authors identified the problem of communications. Herwig (1982) observed that communications problems between parents and teachers were the result of stresses between families and schools. He further noted that the parents’ viewpoint of the teacher
was as critic of their parenting skills. As already mentioned this study resonated with me. Baker and Stevenson (1986) as well as Deslandres, Royer, Turcotte, and Bertrand (1997) found that a factor labelled “communication with teachers” showed a negative relationship with school grades. I noted that throughout the narrative, schools had plenty of communication with me when my children were not achieving good grades or were problematic in other ways. D’Angelo and Adler (1991) identified the importance of face to face communications—ones where good news was consciously communicated, noting of course that telephone calls, which always relayed negative information (my lived experience) were not effective communication. Hickman, Greenwood, and Miller (1995) found an important aspect of involvement was communications. Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, and Killings (1998) concluded effective parent-school communications had effects on grade point averages. Smith (2001) stated that communications problems were one of the barriers to parental participation in the Individualized Educational Plan process. Dietz (1997) recommended what he considered to be appropriate parental communication having observed inappropriate communications. Intending to overcome ineffective communications, Hornby (2000) identified five methods of communication between parents and schools: informal contacts, telephone contacts, written communications, parent-teacher meetings, and home visits. Fuller and Olsen (1998) worried that, for the most part, communication was one-way and that teachers needed to learn two-way communication with parents. It seemed that I was not alone in identifying problematic communications as a theme of parental experience of schools during this time period.
The second theme was the theme of *Cultural Dissonance* or perhaps a lack of diversity in the communities in which we lived. We lived in cultures which we were not part of, for example, Francophone Quebec and Newfoundland. In the “Screechin’ In” ceremony in Newfoundland \(^\text{20}\) the celebrant declared, “Now ye be one of we.” But the fact was we were never one of “we”.

Again this theme was also reflected in the literature, although not necessarily in precisely the way we experienced it. Clark (1983) was interested in the relationship between cultural styles in 10 poor black families and found it was a main determinant of competent performance at school. The cultural style that was effective mapped on the dominant discourse promoted by the school. Dornbusch (1986) saw that family behaviour patterns influenced grades. The implication was that those that mapped on the dominant discourse influenced grades positively. Harry (1992) studied 12 low-income Puerto Rican families with children labelled as learning disabled and found that different cultural meanings caused parents to reject the notion of disability. He also reported in 1992 on African American families and found that professionals had a deficit view of African American families and that this resulted in a power imbalance. Harry (1997) observed

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\(^{20}\) The “Screech In” Ceremony:
1. A bottle of Screech, Jamaican rum bottled in Newfoundland
2. The “Screech In” ceremony can only be performed by a natural-born Newfoundlander.
3. A real fish (traditionally a cod).
4. A Sou’Wester. The celebrant (the natural-born Newfoundlander), will have the inductee stand in front of a group of witnesses while wearing the Sou’Wester. The celebrant will then hold up the fish to the inductee’s mouth so that the inductee can kiss the fish (on the lips). {The celebrant and witnesses have final say on whether the kiss is sufficient to continue. In rare cases, two or more kisses have to be administered}. Next, the celebrant will gingerly pour a full shot of Screech. This is handed to the inductee and he or she has to repeat the following, before drinking, and while holding the glass high: "Long may your big jib draw." When I was Screeched In Aunt Luce (the celebrant) then declared, “Now ye be one of we. Long may your big jib draw.” (Source: http://storesonline.com/site/1495114/page/896940 aided by my memory).
that the greatest conflict occurred when dealing with families that looked different than the educator. Sileo and Prater (1998) researched barriers to parents’ involvement in their child’s special education. Barriers included English proficiency, being a member of minority race or culture, and the number of negative experiences that the parents had already had. Carnevale and Desrochers (1999) noted that cultural background played a role in the setting of parental expectations and therefore subsequent satisfaction. Finally, my attention was called again to Raymond’s (2002) theme of the gazes of others. The literature certainly indicated that issues concerning parental involvement and subsequently parental experience of schools were to be expected when there was cultural difference and then dissonance between families and schools.

Another theme I identified was *Expectations* or the juxtaposition of hope and despair; it was already identified in Chapter One as the beginning and the ending. My expectations were one thing, what I experienced was at times completely contrary. Hope and despair were juxtaposed throughout the narrative. In the section on themes, I meant them specifically as they relate to expectations. Some of the literature considered expectations. For example, Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, and Killings (1998) identified that parents were positively involved when they had high expectations and aspirations. They did not, however, comment on the school actively dissuading parental involvement and dashing expectations, although his study indicated that such a scenario would have negative effects on grade point average. Masino and Hodapp (1996) researched a national sample of grade 8 students with disabilities and found that parental expectations were influenced by parent education, race, and previous school performance for students with and without disabilities. I wanted to see this study investigate further the
issue of previous school performance's role as an expectations dasher. My experience was implied by this but it did not go far enough to truly reflect my experience. In general, the literature saw a relationship between high parental expectations of the child and school performance. This was somewhat relevant to my study as my high expectations became despair and this no doubt had a negative effect on my children's school performance. However, because there was a paucity of experience literature, the precise issue of dashed expectations in my narrative, not as a result of the children's performance but as a result of the schools' performance was not addressed by the literature.

Another theme was our (me and my children's) conception of our own Otherness. We were constant outsiders beyond not sharing a culture: newcomers, labelled children, and people of size. Generally, the literature addressed the more universal issue of cultural difference as opposed to the individual difference that this theme implied. The special needs literature addressed this theme more intensely. Leff and Walizer (1992) identified that parental concerns seemed to have common threads: vulnerability, guilt, and isolation. As previously indicated, my experience was expressed in this study. Green and Shinn (1995) reported that one-third of parents with special needs children involved in their survey did not attend any school conferences at all because of feelings of inferiority and other emotions. The literature on special needs seemed to indicate that one would expect to find as a theme the issue of Otherness in a narrative that involved two special needs children.

I have also identified the theme of Professionalism of teachers. It was possible to see that teachers thinking of themselves as professionals accounted for some of the
phenomenological essence of my narrative. The literature addressed this theme. Williams (1984) reported that professional educators supported parent involvement only if the parents received professional instruction. Harry (1992) reported professionals as having deficit views of certain families of special needs children. Seligman and Darling (1997), within the context of family systems theory, examined the roles and points of views of both professionals and parents and the interaction between the two as they related to children attending special education and diagnosed as disabled. As this sampling of literature indicated, teachers saw themselves as professionals who had superior knowledge to amateur parents, particularly in the case of special needs children. Again, the literature indicated that one would expect to find this theme identified in my narrative.

Next, and in many ways the most difficult, was the theme of Rage. As a result of the conditions under which Middle Son lived in the classroom and at school, he developed a deeply held sense of rage. Manno, Bantz, and Kauffman (2000) noted that rage is an internal state of extreme anger, an emotion. They further noted that the experience of rage in childhood and adolescence was to a certain extent developmentally normal and was a concern when rage became violence. The literature that I have reviewed in Chapter Two on parental involvement, satisfaction, and experience did not reveal even peripherally the theme of rage. However, Lasky (2000) in writing about teachers’ experience of school noted:

The literature on emotions indicates that people experience happiness when their purposes are being fulfilled or when they experience feelings of achievement.....When purposes cannot be achieved, anxiety, anger, frustration, guilt and other
negative emotions are the consequence (Hargreaves, 1998; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; cited in Lasky p. 852).

Surely, at the very least, the same applied to a student.

There was a different set of literature available that related the school system and a sense of extraordinary rage that developed in students, and for this theme I have turned to this literature. Most of the literature that identified rage as part of a school experience also identified that “at risk” or “gifted” factors were present. These included Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995), Cross (2001), and Kuykendall (2004). Packer (2005) listed “teacher triggers of rage” and discussed teachers who “pushed a child known to have deficits past his or her limits” (p.5). Middle Son was diagnosed as Attention Deficit Disorder and was uprooted frequently. For these reasons he was “at risk”. He developed a sense of rage. Rage was identified in some literature as being a consequence of schooling. I believed that this dissertation would fall short if it did not identify this tragic consequence of my and Middle Son’s experience of school.

The seventh theme I have identified is Silencing. I both was silenced and silenced myself. Thiesmeyer (2003) wrote silencing clearly involved choices made by other people as well as by the person silenced. Silencing occurred when accompanied by social and political judgements of what was acceptable and unacceptable. Herwig (1982) identified that parents’ viewpoint of the teacher was as critic of their parenting skills. Such a judgement could lead to silencing. Social judgement was particularly present and identified in the special needs literature. Leff and Walizer (1992) identified that parental emotions of vulnerability, guilt, and isolation led to nonparticipation. Green and Shinn (1995) identified that parents admitted that they did not play an active role because they were concerned about being found wanting or judged. Green and Shinn (1995) reported
that one-third of parents involved in their survey did not attend any school conferences at all. Feelings of inferiority and other emotions of parents with special needs children led to their varying levels of non-involvement. Hornby (1995) stressed that school professionals should be mindful of parents’ feelings, presumably to keep parents communicating. Sileo and Prater (1998) researched barriers to parents’ involvement in their child’s special education. Their main finding was that parents were not involved if the school was not comfortable with them being involved. Other barriers included: English proficiency; being a member of a minority race or culture; and the number of negative experiences that the parents had already had. Such barriers created the conditions for silencing or self-silencing. Smith (2001) listed barriers to parental participation in specifically the Individualized Educational Plan process as being: communication problems; lack of understanding of the school system; lack of knowledge of their child’s disability; and feelings of inferiority. In summary, the special needs literature in particular indicated that many parents feared judgement and as a result did not participate and were silenced.

Self-silencing was also relevant in consideration of my narrative. Women self-silenced to keep outer harmony, and to preserve the relationship (Jack, 1991). The narrative had many examples of this behaviour on my part. The literature indicated that a theme of silencing was expected to be found in my narrative.

3.3.4 Describing the Phenomenon through the Art of Writing

A hermeneutic phenomenological study was a linguistic experience. Language was the medium through which the descriptive, interpretive, and understanding aspects of
hermeneutic phenomenology were expressed. “Lived experience is soaked through with language” (van Manen, 1990, p. 38). Van Manen (1990) described the importance of language:

If the description is phenomenologically powerful, then it acquires a certain transparency, so to speak, it permits us to see the deeper significance, or meaning structures of the lived experiences it describes. How is such transparency achieved? It is a function of the appropriate thoughtfulness that we have managed to muster in creating exemplary descriptions by, for example, being sensitive to the evocative tone of language in which descriptions are captured (p. 122).

Human science, by means of written text, was intentional or organized narrative (van Manen, 1990). That was why in human science creating text meant reflecting on it by definition (van Manen, 1990). The act of writing permanently maintained thoughts in language. Writing forced what was hidden to be exposed, what was internal to be external, what was invisible to be visible (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenologically speaking, writing captured the essence of something. Writing enabled describing something and feeling what one was describing. Smith (1998) wrote, “Writing is the task of seeing, hearing, and feeling more deeply one’s responsibility for children” (p. 30). Writing brought understanding and interpretation together. Van Manen (1990) described the significant importance of writing:

Yet for the human sciences, and specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself. We might even argue that even for traditional social science research the cognitive stance required to do research is closely related to the cognitive style of writing. Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world. As we stare at the paper, and stare at what we have written, our objectified thinking now stares back at us. Thus, writing creates the reflective
cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences. The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible (p. 125).

As I indicated previously, my phenomenological writing of the narrative was effortless. I knew that what I have written did reveal the phenomenon of the parental experience. Others, working phenomenologically, seemed to have had the same experience. Hultgren (1996) said that phenomenology leads you. Van Manen (1990) said that phenomenology was existential, perhaps existing outside of oneself.

Although I believed I have written phenomenologically, there was one aspect of the van Manen method that I did not follow. What I did not follow was the revision and rewriting. Perhaps, that was the difference between writing autobiographically and recording the lived experiences of others. I knew I did capture the lived experience in words.

### 3.3.5 **Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation**

Max van Manen’s other books *The Tone of Teaching* (1986) and *The Tact of Teaching* (1991) had much to say about pedagogy and it was through the identification of pedagogy in them that I judged the orientation of my narrative to pedagogy. Van Manen identified that parents were the first pedagogues. In fact, he argued that teachers’ role as pedagogues came from the parents through the notion of *in loco parentis* (van Manen, 1986, 1991). My narrative was a parent’s narrative. I was a pedagogue as van Manen described it:
We pedagogues (teachers and parents) willingly open ourselves to children. This means that we do our utmost to understand what it is like to be in the world as a child. More concretely, I do my very best to understand the situation of this child. How does this child experience life in its multifaceted dimensions? (van Manen, 1986, p. 13).

Further, Smith (1998) said the pedagogical relation “requires us to question our approach to each and every child” (p.177). My narrative urged this relation.

As already mentioned my narrative, although offered as a cautionary tale, was still a narrative of parental hope even if juxtaposed by despair. This too indicated that my narrative had a pedagogical orientation. Says van Manen:

This experience of hope distinguishes a pedagogic life from a non-pedagogic one. It also makes clear that we can only hope for children we truly love, in a pedagogic sense. What hope gives us is this simple confirmation: "I will not give up on you. I know you can make a life for yourself." Hope refers to all that gives us patience, tolerance and belief in the possibilities for our children. Hope is our experience of the child's possibilities. It is our experience of confidence that a child will show us how life is to be lived, no matter how many disappointments we may have experienced. Thus hope gives us pedagogy. Or is it pedagogy that gives us hope? (van Manen, 1986, p. 27).

I have provided my narrative clearly with pedagogical intent. I hoped others would learn from it. Said van Manen:

On the one hand, the reflective awareness of our pedagogical intents enables us to make our pedagogical lives conversationally available: debatable, accountable, evaluable (van Manen, 1991, p.19).

The validity of my pedagogical orientation continued:
Telling anecdotes is helpful because it gives people a sense of how to look at an experience or event, how to construct interpretations about what is pedagogically significant in those situations, and possibly what to do about it (van Manen, 1991, p. 205).

And finally:

To ask questions about the nature of pedagogy, what it means to educate and bring up children and young people, there are two essentially different starting points. On the one hand, we can start by developing a theory of education and then let our actions be informed by this theory. Or, on the other hand, we can start with life itself and let our reflections about our living with children and young people help us to better understand pedagogical life. Much educational theory follows the first route. Here we have tried as much as possible to start with life itself (van Manen, 1991, pp. 214 -215).

My narrative if nothing else had a pedagogical orientation.

**3.3.6 Balancing the Context by Considering Parts and Whole.**

On many occasions in the past three years, since the narrative was written, I have stepped back and looked at the total picture, considered the parts and the whole in order to expose the true essence of the phenomenon. I have spent a lot of time thinking about context. Where did my reactions to the events of my parental experience come from? I have thought a lot about my own childhood and school-hood experiences as they related to the themes I developed. Did my reactions to experiences come from me, from my stock of knowledge? Some of this balancing of context relating mainly to the theme of Otherness I experienced as narrative writing which I shared in the Appendix 1. But, it is about balancing; many of the vignettes stand alone and I invite others to interpret and understand them without my context as a handicap.
3.4 Summary of Chapter Three


My narrative was appropriately identified as a phenomenology of the lifeworld as reported and interpreted by van Manen (1990). The question of what was the parent’s experience was consistent with this view of phenomenology by asking the question of what was the nature or meaning of something. I re-learned to look at my original experience. I interpreted and understood my texts. I followed the notions of distancification and participation, the two tracked journey, both stepping away from my narrative and being embedded in it at the same time.

Van Manen outlined a framework consisting of six research activities: turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 1990, pp. 30–31). I showed how I have completed all of van Manen’s activities and presented them in subsequent Chapters of the dissertation.

In order to assist the reader, I identified the seven themes that I saw in the narrative. These themes were also identified in the literature. The themes were:
communications, cultural dissonance, expectations, otherness, professionalism, rage, and silencing.
4.0 NARRATIVE METHOD

4.1 Outline of Chapter Four

In this chapter I outline the conceptual frameworks in which narrative as method may be embedded. These include autobiographical narrative, action research, autoethnography, and narrative inquiry. I demonstrate what features of these narrative methods are present in my narrative and provide two examples of autobiographical narrative from writers whose auto narratives are similar in content and broad style to my own. I discuss how I intend to blend van Manen’s conceptual framework of hermeneutic phenomenology with these methods of narrative and in particular with the method of narrative inquiry. Finally, I present the issues that are present in autobiographical writing.

4.2 Conceptual Frameworks in Which Narrative May Be Embedded as Method

Jerome Bruner (1985) discussed the value of the narrative mode as opposed to the logico-scientific mode as a way to understand the human experience. According to his view, “the shift is to a world that once again acknowledges the drama and metaphor of good stories as an equally significant way of understanding human experiences” (p. 98). My interest was in narrative and in particular autobiographical narrative writing as research. Mostly such narratives were retrospective (Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985). They were commentary of an individual’s very personal view of experience; they were an attempt to define the growth of a person in a culture and to make theoretical sense of it; they were culturally produced (Tierney 1993); and they were shaped by each person’s
choice and selective memory (Bateson, 1989). Some authors offered more politically constructed *raisons d'être* for the genre, notably Beverly (1998) and Tierney (1998). Beverly identified the narrative’s “connection with a group or class situation marked by marginality, oppression or struggle.” Tierney (1998) stated that “the purpose is social change” (p. 538).

Although I had chosen van Manen’s conceptual framework of hermeneutic phenomenology for framing my work, my approach was based on a narrative, which appears in its entirety in Chapter Five. Narrative method might be used in many conceptual frameworks amongst them ethnography, autoethnography, life stories, biography, autobiography, narrative inquiry, critical theory, action research, testimonial, and of course phenomenology. The narrative method crossed disciplines in the social sciences, the health sciences to some degree, and the humanities: philosophy, anthropology, psychology, psychotherapy, history, literature, and education. It was particularly valuable when the *raison d'être* for the discipline was the understanding of humans and their behaviours (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Given that my use of narrative was self-referential it moved away from some of the methods listed above. It was not based in a political structure and thus I have not adopted a critical theory or action research framework. Rather interpreting and understanding my experiences was my primary purpose. Nor did I set out to study culture, although my exposure of the phenomenon of a parent experiencing her children’s schools certainly was set within a broad Canadian culture and within subcultures of provinces, communities and schools. I noted, however, that I did not have a privileged
insider's view of schooling the way a teacher or a principal had nor did I try to gain access to one in this research. For these reasons I did not think of my study as ethnography or autoethnography. This was not to say, however, that the narrative methods of these conceptual frameworks did not have relevance to my narrative.

4.3 Two Examples of Autobiographical Narrative

I have chosen two autobiographical narratives that were frequently quoted as examples of modern or postmodern autobiographies in the broad literature that I read in my search for relevant models of autobiographical narrative. Surprisingly, I found that some of the words written by these two authors could have been written by me about my own experiences and some of their observations could equally apply to my narrative as to their own. (I do not mean to imply that I am a person of the stature of either of these authors, but rather offer this information to illustrate that my narrative was of a certain genre.) The two I have chosen are Clark Blaise’s (1993) *I Had a Father* and Richard Rodriguez’s (1982) *Hunger of Memory*.

As my family did, Clark Blaise experienced frequent uprooting as a child. Says Blaise (1993), “I come from nowhere, I live nowhere, my future is no place” (p. 38). Further he added:

Each move is like an affair, a change of air, a lightness of step, a clean slate, and a fresh start. I am not an exile forced to change residences as a matter of survival; I’m more a barnacle hitching a ride (Blaise, 1993, p. 49).

He wrote that “memory is a guide to the future as well as a recollection of the past” (Blaise, 1993, p. 76). “Not only that, but memory promises re-beginnings, second acts.
Memory condenses the time-flow, past and future. Time flows both ways. Linearity is an illusion" (Blaise, 1993, p.76). The thing that I found remarkable was that he did not refer to geographic time which was the way my children and I told time. We never saw time as linear but only geographic. The space shuttle Columbia crashed when we were in Northwestern Ontario. The Blue Jays won the World Series when we were in Newfoundland. The Westray Mine disaster happened when we were in Northern Ontario. But he realigned with us when he said:

I am the product of tangled loyalties and continual uprooting. I'm a native of nowhere. I do not know where I come from because I have come from just about everywhere (Blaise, 1993, p.106).

His description of being strapped in school could have been written by me on behalf of Middle Son:

This was the violation of everything I had lived with, everything I believed, everything I trusted. Adults, especially teachers, with whom I had been on such friendly terms in Florida (they used to visit my mother just to talk, the only college graduates in the town) did not attack boys like me. Injustice I could live with. Indignity, never (Blaise, 1993, p.107).

There's a whole new literary tradition to invoke here: the books that signal the outbreak of revolution, that trigger murder and assassination, not from oppression, but from a moment's inattention, the victim's casual assumption of the killer's lesser humanity. In books, people don't kill to avenge brutality; they avenge indignities. We can tolerate just about anything if we know in the final analysis we count for something, however slight. The proof that we don't count at all is intolerable. In Absalom, Absalom!, in All the King's Men, in The Great Gatsby, the motive for murder is not a criminal act, it's a small moral oversight (Blaise, 1993, p.107).
His descriptions of his reasons for writing aligned with my own:

I know my childhood was one-of-a-kind, not at all for its fecklessness—on this restless, errant continent I set no records—but for its lack of coherence. ...Whatever lesson my life might impart to others, unless I write about it and can do justice to it, has been lost. Whatever I might have learned is still locked away. I haven't strayed from the shape and contents of my life because I'm still trying to discover what I left behind (Blaise, 1993, p.109).

Finally:

THIS IS WHAT I KNOW of autobiography: there comes a time in everyone's life when accumulated contradictions take their toll. Chaos mounts: the out-there, call it fiction if you're a writer, takes up residence in-here and becomes autobiography. Fiction is freedom; a walking away from origins, using what you want and leaving the rest alone. What remains is autobiography, the connections that make your life, but not your characters' lives, meaningful. In autobiography, you grapple to accept the origins and to surmount their limitations, if you can (Blaise, 1993, pp.179-180).

With Rodríquez (1982) we shared the experience of Catholic schools, and cultural differences. In Rodríquez's (1982) work, Middle Son too could have written:

...three nuns arrived at the house to talk to our parents. Stiffly, they sat on the blue living room sofa. From the doorway of another room, spying the visitors, I noted the incongruity—the clash of two worlds, the faces and voices of school intruding upon the familiar setting of home (Rodríguez, 1982, p. 19).

Or Daughter:

...the nuns distrusted intellectual challenges to authority. In religion class especially, they would grow impatient with the relentlessly questioning student. When one nun told my parents that their youngest daughter had a 'mind of her own'
she meant the remark to be a negative criticism (Rodriquez, 1982, pp. 95-96).

Or me (but I would substitute the word “school”, whether secular or parochial):

Secular institutions lack the key; they have no basis for claiming access to the realm of the private. When they try to deny their limits, secular institutions only lie. They pretend that there is no difference between public and private life. The worst are totalitarian governments. They respect no notion of privacy. They intrude into a family's life. They ignore the individual's right to be private. They would bulldoze the barrier separating the public from the private. They create the modern nightmare of institutional life (Rodriquez, 1982, p. 116).

And finally for me:

His feelings are capable of public intelligibility. In turn, the act of revelation helps the writer understand his own feelings. Such is the benefit of language: By finding public words to describe oneself to oneself. One names what was previously only darkly felt (Rodriquez, 1982, p. 203).

I told these tales of Blaise (1993) and Rodriquez (1982) as they wrote autobiographical narrative. One studied the phenomenon of the relationship with his father, the other the phenomenon of experiencing the world as an immigrant. I did not know if every word they wrote was true from a positivist perspective. What I did know was that my understanding and interpretation of the phenomena was much richer and deeper after reading their narratives than it was before. I offered my own narrative for the same purpose.
4.4 Narrative in Action Research

While I recognized that my narrative was not action research, my narrative had elements in common with narratives that were produced for action research purposes. In action research, researchers saw different kinds of knowledge integrated in their own lives (McNiff, 2002).

The process of research becomes the practice, and because we are involved in a research process of thinking, evaluating and acting, the practice is a form of research. The boundaries are dissolved: knowledge, interests and practice are integrated within a life (McNiff, 2002, p.36).

My narrative was not used for the purposes of improving my active practice as a parent but the other elements were all present in my narrative: knowledge integrated in my own life, thinking and evaluating, and dissolved boundaries.

Marshall (2008) wrote that in action research:

Criteria included writing that:

Evokes the experiences, themes and issues of the inquiry for the reader; Communicates conceptually through the congruence of content and form; Accounts for the writer’s process, and its resonance with form and content; Renders the sense making appropriately contentious, in ways which illuminate the issues explored; and Provokes readers’ engagement and debate (p. 693).

My narrative included all of the above criteria and again I offered my own narrative for these same engagements.
4.5 Narrative in Autoethnography

If narrative and story even autobiographical and self narrative were re-introduced in the human sciences it was mostly due to anthropology and ethnography in particular. It was within these disciplines that old ideas were contested and new ideas were introduced. In the past anthropologists and ethnographers, in particular, tried to remove themselves, their personal history, their culture and their world view from the work. They saw themselves or took great pains to make themselves neutral observers. But it was never clear that that was possible. In the mid 1980s there was a clamour for change. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 2000) described it in their Introduction, there was a crisis of representation. The self was introduced and permitted to be present. This led in part to the development of autoethnography as an acceptable method in the field.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined autoethnography as “autobiographies that self consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation” (p. 742). Chang (2008) identified four styles of autoethnographical writings: descriptive-realist, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative. He, however, identified five pitfalls of autoethnography: excessive focus on self in isolation from others; overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; exclusive reliance on personal memory; negligence of ethical standards regarding others; and inappropriate application of the label autoethnography.

My narrative aligned with some of the narrative method of autoethnography and did not align with others. My narrative style was primarily based on the first two of Chang’s forms: descriptive-realist and confessional-emotive. I did analyze and interpret
what I have written, but not within the narrative itself. Of the pitfalls I was perhaps guilty of the second one, the overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation. Although I did analyze the narrative, I have not interpreted it culturally, but then again I have not claimed my narrative to be autoethnography although it did share elements with autoethnographic narratives. On the issue of reliance on personal memory, I did expose the narrative to my three children. I read the finished product to Middle Son; only because reading it to him was the only way I could be positive that he would actually read it. Daughter read it for herself. I asked Eldest Son to read it when he was home for Christmas of 2005. He did. Eldest Son was comfortable with what I had written. Middle Son and Daughter were very pleased that I had written their story. They both felt battered by the school system and they thought that my narrative gave them some voice. They encouraged me to tell the story more from their perspective and less from mine but I resisted. I told them this was a story of what a parent experienced when interacting with her children’s schools, my story, and to some extent not theirs. The phenomenon studied here was a particular parent’s experience of her children’s schooling.

4.6 Narrative in Narrative Inquiry

4.6.1 The Edmonton Connection

As van Manen was connected to the University of Alberta (located in Edmonton, Alberta), so was Jean Clandinin, who together with Michael Connelly, produced the flagship work on narrative inquiry as method (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, Clandinin, 2007). It seemed logical to me that van Manen’s and Clandinin and Connelly’s work should be connected as it seemed they are intertwined. It seemed logical
to me that you cannot have one without the other; that one flowed from the other. In order to have a hermeneutic phenomenology as van Manen viewed it at least, you needed to have a narrative or text of some sort. In order to have a narrative you needed to have a phenomenon. Even Clandinin and Connelly seemed to see that as evidenced by the following quotations:

What do we imagine that we can learn about our phenomenon by engaging in narrative inquiry that will be special or unique? How will a narrative inquiry fit with, enlarge, or shift the social and theoretical conversations around our phenomenon of interest? We need to be prepared to give an account of what we learn about our phenomenon that is special, something that could not be known through other theories or methods (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 123).

We frequently faced this question in our early work as narrative inquirers. ...Although we are asked this question less often now, we feel it is important to ask this question of all of our inquiries. What does narrative inquiry help us learn about our phenomenon that other theories or methods do not? (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.123).

As we think about the phenomena in a narrative inquiry, we think about responding to the questions: What is your narrative inquiry about? or What is the experience of interest to you as a narrative inquirer? (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 124).

In Chapter Three, we pointed out that formalists begin inquiry in theory, whereas narrative inquirers tend to begin with experience as lived and told in stories. Here we wish to point out that for narrative inquiry, it is more productive to begin with explorations of the phenomena of experience rather than in comparative analysis of various theoretical methodological frames (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 128).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicated that they learned “to move back and forth between the personal and the social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present, and future, and did so in ever-expanding social milieus” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000,
I tried to do this moving backward and forward throughout this dissertation, relying on academic writings as well as personal perspective and history.

### 4.6.2 Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space

Foundational to their notion of narrative inquiry was embeddedness in *three-dimensional inquiry space*. They described a metaphor of a three-dimensional space, in which narrative inquirers would find themselves. It pointed them backward and forward, inward and outward, and located them in place. They saw these dimensions as directions or avenues to be pursued in a narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Their view became that narrative inquirers were in “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, always located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 144).

I easily saw that my narrative fitted in this three-dimensional space. The division of the process into the following categories: I lived it, I wrote about it, and I reflected on it, alone indicated a backward and forward in time format of my narrative. Inward and outward were two types of the reflection that I had done already, the private reflection that had already taken place and the public reflection that was embarked on by presenting this dissertation. Mine was truly a location in place. It was in the country Canada, in places called school, in several cultures that were not my own, all part of the place of the narrative. These were just a few of the ways of thinking about my narrative but sufficient demonstration that mine was a narrative that fitted the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry.
In narrative thinking, time was a feature. Locating things in time was the way to think about them. “Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 29). The features as described above led to the conclusion that “the central ideas of narrative—emplotment, character, scene, place, time and, point-of-view” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 26. italics in original).

However, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) rightfully pointed out that not all readers may be comfortable with these notions as many interpreted these things as indicating contrivance. However, they were the features of lived experience and therefore were fundamental to narrative construction (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). “In the grand narrative, the universal case is of prime interest. In narrative thinking, the person in context is of prime interest” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.32). My narrative had a plot and subplots, characters, scenes, place, time, point of view, and perspective. It was narrative; the person in context was its prime interest.

The “questions of meaning, significance, and purpose are questions of who, why, what, how, context, and form” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 120). In their 1990 article, Connelly and Clandinin wrote:

What Makes a Good Narrative? Beyond Reliability, Validity and Generalizability

Like other qualitative methods, narrative relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research. The language and criteria for the conduct of narrative inquiry are under development in the research community" (1990, p.7).
Further, they wrote about “good narrative as having an *explanatory, invitational* quality, as having *authenticity*, as having *adequacy* and *plausibility*” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 185). Again, I saw my narrative fitted these criteria. It was authentic and plausible. From my perspective it was valid and reliable, but it might not be from another’s perspective, say, that of the principals or teachers identified by pseudonym only in my narrative. But it did not make the narrative any less valuable. My narrative showed the way a parent experienced the school system, of that I was sure. Whether or not it was the intention of the various players that this was the way they meant for it to be experienced might differ from my experience.

Narrative was not positivist scientific research and could not be measured by the same criteria; rather narrative was a way of understanding experience.

Our excitement and interest in narrative has its origins in our interest in experience. With narrative as our vantage point, we have a point of reference, a life and a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is and for imagining how it might be studied and represented in researchers’ texts. In this view, experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi).

My story was lived and told hoping to educate myself and others.

Generally Clandinin and Connelly meant basing narrative on field notes or living with others. However, they did not rule out the role of self/auto and I was hopeful that I saw a nod of approval for auto/self in their way of thinking. They wrote:
... what became clear to us was that as inquirers we meet ourselves in the past, the present, and the future. What we mean by this is that we tell remembered stories of ourselves from earlier times as well as more current stories. All of these stories offer possible plotlines for our futures. Telling stories of ourselves in the past leads to the possibility of retellings. It is not only the participants' stories that are retold by a narrative inquirer. In our cases, it is also the inquirers' (Michael's and Jean's) stories that are open for inquiry and retelling (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 60).

This telling of ourselves, this meeting of ourselves in the past through inquiry, makes clear that as inquirers we, too, are part of the parade. We have helped make the world in which we find ourselves. We are not merely objective inquirers, people on the high road, who study a world lesser in quality than our moral temperament would have it, people who study a world we did not help create. On the contrary, we are complicit in the world we study. Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 61).

They concluded that "reaching across autobiographically storied boundaries is possible, perhaps even necessary, for the creation of narrative insight" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 66). Further they stated that it was important to acknowledge:

...the centrality of the researcher's own experience—the researcher's own livings, tellings, retellings, and relivings. One of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researcher's autobiography. This task of composing our own narratives of experience is central to narrative inquiry. We refer to this as composing narrative beginnings as a researcher begins his or her inquiries. For example, in our introduction to this book, we each told something of our narrative beginnings that framed our early work on teacher knowledge. As we compose our narrative beginnings, we also work within the three-dimensional space, telling stories of our past that frame our present standpoints, moving back and forth from the personal to the social, and situating it all in place (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 70).

Narrative inquirers, said Clandinin and Connelly were, "in for the long haul," and they were "working toward intimacy of relationship" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000,
"Narrative inquiry, from this point of view, is one of trying to make sense of life as lived" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.78). My auto/self narrative had these qualities, the long haul and intimacy of relationship. They used the phrase “experiencing the experience” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 80). Surely I had experienced the experience, there was no doubt. They believed, as Donald Schön (1983) also pointed out, that “those who write on the practical importance of reflective practice... write about a way for someone both to lead a life and to reflect on it, thereby combining living with self-criticism and growth” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 82). I appreciated that Schön and to a certain extent Clandinin and Connelly meant teachers, not parents, reflecting but why was it different? Surely a parent too could thoughtfully reflect on her own practice and the practice of others in the pedagogical relationship. Van Manen (1986, 1990, 1991) reminded us constantly that parents were the original practitioners of pedagogy, while a teacher’s call to pedagogy only came through the notion of in loco parentis. “Enhancing personal and social growth is one of the purposes of narrative inquiry” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 85). I again offered my own narrative for the same purpose.

4.7 Issues that Arise in Auto Narrative

There were pitfalls too to auto narrative. But were they any different than the reconstruction of someone else’s tale? Molloy (1991) noted that autobiography was always a "re-presentation, that is, a retelling, because the life to which it supposedly refers is already a kind of narrative construct” (quoted in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 101). “Life is always, necessarily, a tale" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 5). Any piece of autobiographical writing was "a particular reconstruction of an individual’s narrative, and there could be other reconstructions" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, p.
This was no different than any field text which was constructed representations of experience. Narrative inquiries were always strongly autobiographical (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

As I have already said, I did not view my narrative as autobiography. It was not an autobiography in as much as it did not cover the details of my life even during the period in question but rather it was an auto narrative identifying the phenomenon of what was the parental experience when interacting with her children’s schools. I had not told, for example, about my marriage or my professional career in ways that were not related to the phenomenon under study. However, I fully recognized that I needed to be prepared for the autobiographical microscope to be applied to my narrative.

As Neisser (1994) pointed out “autobiographical memory is best taken with a grain of salt” (p. 8). “The self that is remembered today is not the historical self of yesterday, but only a reconstructed version. A different version – a new remembered self – may be reconstructed tomorrow” (Neisser, 1994, p. 8). Bruner (1994) addressed the issue of what was remembered:

Obviously, one of these processes is selective memory retrieval. But what sorts of criteria guide the selectivity? One set of them must surely be derived from some sort of "need" to emphasize agency, to recover memories related to the initiation of relatively autonomous acts governed by our intentional states – our wishes, desires, beliefs, and expectancies...... The claim, simply, is that Self is a concept one of whose defining properties is agency (pg 41).

But this criterion also has, as it were, its flip side: Let us call it victimicy. If our Self-concept cannot be constructed by
assembling and conceptualizing instances of our own agentive acts, then it can be constructed according to the same principle by attributing it to the agency of another. According to this view, we construct a victim Self, by reference to memories of how we responded to the agency of somebody else who had the power to impose his or her will upon us directly, or indirectly by controlling the circumstances in which we are compelled to live (pg 41).

I saw in my narrative both agency and victimicy. These were issues that required awareness. Bruner (1994) also reminded us that remembering was done in a cultural context. I understood this and it was something to be aware of as my narrative or anyone else's cannot be accepted as factual to a level of accuracy that someone would apply to a positivist scientific experiment.\(^\text{21}\) These were all cautions that must be considered when reading autobiographical writings, even mine, but they were cautions to be also understood and interpreted and in the end they did not invalidate the autobiographical narrative experience.

Neimeyer and Metzer (1994) noted the role of the continuously evolving self in autobiographical remembering. They presented Robinson's definition of an autobiographical memory as a personal "record of discrete experiences arising from a person's participation in acts or situations which were to some degree localized in time and place" (Robinson, 1976, p. 578, quoted in Neimeyer and Metzer, 1994, p. 105). This aligned with Neisser's characterization of autobiographical memory as "the form of memory in which the events of one's life comprise the significant memoria" (Neisser, 1988, p. 361, quoted in Neimeyer and Metzler, 1994, p. 105). Barclay noted that most autobiographical memories are largely "true but inaccurate" in the sense that "truth in

\(^{21}\) For example, if you were to interview my mother (and you cannot because she died in 1997) I suspect she might tell you that as a mother she occasionally spanked her children. However, given the current or even the 1997 cultural context, I am doubtful she would tell you her weapon of choice was a hairbrush.
autobiographical memory is preserved as one conveys the meaning of life events through plausible reconstructions of those events" (Barclay, 1986, p. 97 and Barclay 1988, p. 293, respectively, quoted in Neimeyer and Metzler, 1994, p. 111). This was a legitimate critique of autobiographical works and although I was quite sure that every event described in my narrative was how I experienced it, it might be true but inaccurate from the perspective of others. That was the nature of autobiographical remembering.

Wagenaar (1994) questioned “whether the forgetting and remembering of events from one's own life serve the selfish goal of preserving a positive self-image” (p. 191). He stated that suggestions of this kind were made by Greenwald (1980) but Ross (1989) contested this view, arguing that what looked like a preservation of self-esteem might in reality be only a preservation of consistency (cited in Wagenaar, 1994, p. 191). As I applied these two aspects of autobiography to my work I was not sure even of my own assessment. Since I did not believe that in the end I came off looking very good in my narrative, it was difficult to argue that positive self-image was my goal. In fact, I was paralyzed by inaction and failed to serve my children, Daughter in particular. I did think, when I was writing, about some of the shortcomings of certain teachers in the narrative, but the narrative was probably more influenced by the preservation of consistency argument rather than striving for my own positive self-image.

Ross and Bueheler (1994) noted that when recall was public, social context affected the stories that individuals told about their lives. The result might be deliberate efforts on the part of the rememberer to tailor recall for specific listeners/readers. “Rememberers” they said, “may wish to provide accounts that are comprehensible,
relevant, inoffensive, and interesting to their audiences” (Ross and Bueheler, 1994, p. 206). Further they noted that “people sometimes construct stories of the past in order to influence an audience's impressions” (Ross and Bueheler, 1994, p 213). They noted too that:

There are also occasions on which people seem to take excessive responsibility for negative events. It helps people to believe that they can control their own futures. The important point is that recall seems goal-driven. People can selectively recall and interpret events in ways that satisfy their personal needs (Ross and Buehler, 1994, p. 214).

I accepted that I was responsible for some of these constructions of narrative. I recalled publicly. I told the story of my children’s and my educational experience probably purposefully to an audience of educators. I thought that it was possible to construe that I had taken excessive responsibility for negative events. “I should have, I could have,” I told myself constantly, and perhaps the outcomes would have been different. Perhaps, it was to believe we can control our own futures, but perhaps too it was one way of maintaining hope.

Ross and Buehler (1994) claimed that a number of authors discussed narrative truth criteria, evaluative standards that depended on people's assessments of the aesthetic quality of a story or recollection (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Spence, 1982). They said:

An account is narratively true to the extent that it is (a) vivid and detailed rather than sketchy, (b) coherent in that events are sequenced and connected in an intuitively plausible manner, and (c) characterologically consistent, with protagonists' actions seeming to stem from their personalities, intentions, and motives. Narrative truth criteria are particularly applicable to people's stories of episodes in their lives. Personal tales often include chronological descriptions of events and actions. People may
judge the validity of such accounts, in part, by evaluating the narrative qualities of the story... (Ross and Bueheler, 1994, p. 226)

Valid memories contain somewhat more sensory and context information; however, observers can discriminate between accurate and inaccurate memories at only slightly better than chance levels. By invoking various truth criteria, individuals may become suspicious of some accounts or believing of others, but they will not necessarily possess a definitive basis for accepting or rejecting people's stories of their pasts (Ross and Bueheler, 1994, p. 229).

These were all matters that needed to be considered when accepting a narrative. I invite you to apply these criteria to my narrative.

4.8 Summary of Chapter Four

Narrative method has been used in many conceptual frameworks, amongst them ethnography, autoethnography, life stories, biography, autobiography, narrative inquiry, critical theory, action research, testimonial, and of course phenomenology. My method was an amalgam of narrative method in narrative autobiographies, action research, autoethnography, and in particular narrative inquiry. I provided two examples of narrative autobiography Blaise (1993) and Rodriguez (1982). While I recognized that my narrative was not action research, my narrative had elements in common with narratives that have been produced for action research purposes. My narrative was not used for the purposes of improving my active practice as a parent but the other elements of action research were all present in my narrative: knowledge integrated in my own life, thinking and evaluating, and dissolved boundaries. It also had common elements with autoethnography. For example, it was descriptive-realist and confessional-emotive,
analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative. It was, however, not particularly concerned with cultural interpretation.

My narrative fitted into the narrative method described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). I moved back and forth between the personal and the social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present, and future. I was embedded in three-dimensional inquiry space: backward and forward, inward and outward, and located in place. In addition, I viewed narrative method as being essential to van Manen’s concept of hermeneutic phenomenology.

There were many issues concerning autobiographical telling including: motives for telling, social context, and the ability to determine truth in the telling. These were all issues that readers should have been aware of when they were dealing with autobiographical material; however, what remained was still a meaningful human experience that could be examined through the conceptual framework of hermeneutic phenomenology.
5.0 OUR LIFE AT SCHOOL: A PENGUIN’S MOTHER FINDS VOICE

5.1 Outline of Chapter Five

The Chapter begins with a listing of the cast of characters that appear in the narrative. Next, a listing of translations of French words used in the narrative is provided to assist the reader who may not be familiar with French. The entire narrative itself is the main part of the chapter as it was written in 2005 and 2006. It begins as Eldest Son entered maternelle and ends as Daughter graduated from grade twelve, a total of 19 years. In that period of time we moved five times, from one side of Canada to the other, from Newfoundland to British Columbia with stops in between. We lived in the unique cultures of Newfoundland and Quebec. We were part of the cultural grouping of professional employees of the Canadian mining industry. We lived in communities with populations ranging from 2,000 to 2 million.

5.2 Cast of Characters: In Order of Appearance


3. Middle Son: born in 1984. Diagnosed as Attention Deficit Disorder when he was two years old. Graduated from high school in 2002. Attending university.

5. Husband: My husband. A geologist by profession. B.Sc (Geology) and B.Ed, born and raised in Halifax.

6. Rascal: *jardin* student who lived next door.

7. Screecher: blonde *jardin* student who lived across the street. Last I heard from her parents, an airline ticket agent.

8. *Madame LaTante*: Eldest Son’s *maternelle* and *jardin* teacher. Rascal’s aunt.


10. Mine Superintendent’s Wife: a neighbour two doors down on the opposite side of our house to Rascal’s house.

11. Mine Superintendent’s Son: a playmate of Eldest Son’s. A Protestant. Last I heard studying religion at university at the graduate level.


13. Little Sister: Screecher’s little sister. Last I heard doing an M.Sc. in Marine Biology.

14. *Troisième*: sister to *Madame La Tante* and Rascal’s mother, a teacher.

15. Ms. Scot: Eldest Son’s grade one teacher.

16. Trilingual: a trilingual Cree woman who was the receptionist at my place of employment.

17. Freckles: a kindergarten and later a grade one student who went to Eldest Son’s school. A native French speaker. He lived two doors away from us with his dad and grandmother.


20. *Manteau Gris*: a grade five student at the neighbourhood French school, who washed Eldest Son’s face with snow and called him a *cochon anglais*. 


23. Madame Lapointe: Daughter’s *maternelle* teacher.

24. Mrs. Seasoned: Eldest Son’s grade three teacher and Middle Son’s grade two teacher. She did not know the provincial capitals and was curious to see what my children were eating for lunch.

25. Mrs. Known: Middle Son’s kindergarten teacher. Daughter’s junior kindergarten and kindergarten teacher.

26. Dr. McMaster: a paediatrician who was associated with McMaster University.

27. *Soeur* Principal: the principal of the Francophone Separate School where Daughter attended *maternelle*.

28. *Montrice*: the French speaking director of the daycare Middle Son attended in Quebec.

29. *Enseigneur*: the director of the nursery school that Middle Son attended for a short while.

30. Mrs. Bright: Middle Son’s grade one teacher.

31. Mr. Office: the principal of the Separate School where Eldest Son attended grade three, four, and five; Middle Son attended Kindergarten, grade one, and grade two; and Daughter attended junior kindergarten and kindergarten.

32. Sister Mildred: the principal of the Catholic school while Eldest Son was in grade six, Middle Son was in grade three, four, and five and Daughter was in grade one, two, and three.

33. Mr. Laid Back: Eldest Son’s grade six teacher and Daughter’s grade four teacher.

34. Mrs. Music: the music teacher at the Catholic school that Eldest Son attended for grade six, Middle Son for grade three, four, five, and six and Daughter for grade one, two, three, and four.

35. Mrs. Kindly: Daughter’s grade one and grade three teacher.

36. Mrs. Team: Middle Son’s grade three teacher.

37. Mrs. Specialed: Middle Son’s special education teacher for grade three, four, five and six. Life line number one.

38. Mrs. Buyout: Middle Son’s grade four teacher.
39. Mr. Team: Middle Son’s grade five teacher and also Daughter’s grade five teacher.

40. Paul: a co-worker of mine capable of tying a tie.

41. Lydia: a close friend of both Middle Son and Daughter. Now the mother of two.

42. Judge’s Daughter: the soloist at the Christmas concert and a figure skater as well.

43. Mrs. Masters: the principal at the Catholic junior high that Middle Son attended for grade seven. Life line number two.

44. Mrs. Sheppard-Collie: the special education teacher assigned to Middle Son for grade seven.

45. Mrs. Related: the school counsellor at the Catholic elementary school in Newfoundland. Daughter had some involvement with her in grade four and grade five.

46. Mr. Shared: the Vice Principal of Middle Son’s junior secondary school, as with many Vice Principals in those days, in fact, responsible for “vice” or the prevention thereof.

47. Mr. Hockey: Middle Son’s Transition Eight teacher. Life line number three.

48. Mr. Hyphen: Middle Son’s grade nine shop teacher.

49. Dr. Character: the principal at Middle Son’s junior secondary school.

50. Mr. Tall: Daughter’s grade six teacher.

51. Mr. Desk: Daughter’s grade seven teacher.

52. Mrs. Needle: the special education teacher who was involved in varying ways with Daughter in grade six and grades seven.

53. Mrs. Petit: the principal of the elementary school that Daughter went to for grade six and seven.

54. Angelo Italiano: a grade eleven student when Eldest Son was a grade twelve student at the Catholic high school in the B.C. Interior. Now a civil engineer whose professional career has crossed paths with Eldest Son’s a few times, last I heard practicing on Vancouver Island.

55. Skateboarder: a classmate of Eldest Son, a walker on the wild side (still). Has been selling KIAs for five years now.
56. Mrs. Coffee/Pasta: Middle Son’s grade ten and grade eleven Art teacher.

57. Mr. Newcomer: the second civilian principal of the Catholic high school in the Interior. Life line number four.

58. Mr. Friend: a friend of our neighbours and Daughter’s grade eight English teacher.

59. Mrs. Recently: Daughter’s classroom teacher for special education subjects in grade eight.

60. Levelheaded: a former co-worker (male) and friend of mine, a Newfoundlander.

61. Seven Syllables: a grade twelve student responsible for the drama club production at Daughter’s high school when Daughter was in grade nine.

62. Mr. Coincident: the counsellor at Middle Son’s grade twelve high school. Life line number five.

63. Mrs. Retiring: Middle Son’s grade twelve Art teacher.

64. Mrs. Minecaller: the Vice Principal at Middle Son’s grade twelve high school, also apparently responsible for "ice".

5.3 Translation of French Words and Expressions

In the first third of the narrative the action takes place in either Ontario communities where there was a high percentage of French speakers or in Quebec. For the most part I have used the word I used at the time, so sometimes it is in French. The exception to this is in vignette 5.4.9 and the incident involving Très Belle. As mentioned, this whole incident took place in French but I thought I might try my readers’ patience to have reported it in French here. Below is a listing of French words and expressions used in the narrative in the order in which they appear along with the English translation.

tourtière: a pork pie.
maternelle: nursery, but in the Ontario school context junior kindergarten, children who are four years old before December 31 are eligible for junior kindergarten or maternelle.

jardin: garden, but in the Ontario school context kindergarten, children who are five years old before December 31.

La Tante: the aunt.

Soeur: Sister, used mostly in my narrative as in a Catholic nun.

homme: man

mari: husband

papa: daddy

dame: woman, lady

femme: wife

maman: mommy

spectacle: a theatrical show

quank, quank: quack, quack

Troisième: Third, in this case the third sister.

cahier de catéchisme: a special scribbler or note book with blank paper on the top of the page and lined paper on the bottom of the page. A uniquely Quebec school supply, now in secular Quebec known as a cahier de projet.

en plastique: in plastic

librairie: stationary store, a library is a bibliothèque.

ski alpin: downhill skiing

Patineur: Skater

sac à dos: depending on where you live in Canada translated differently; on the East Coast a book bag; in Ontario a school bag; in B.C a back pack. My mining friend mentioned in one of the vignettes who lived in Northern Ontario and Newfoundland at the same time we did and who spent the intervening years in Australia said there they referred to it as a “porte”.

cochon anglais: an English pig.

manteau gris: grey coat

Fête de Masques: literally Festival of Masks, used for Halloween in Francophone secular Quebec.
Provigo and Métro: two rival grocery store chains in Quebec at the time.

faux pas: an innocent mistake, usually referring to cultural misunderstanding.

Très Belle: used here as a proper name, Very Pretty or Beautiful.

chaude: hot

gardarie: daycare

montrice: instructor

Il dérange les autres beaucoup. C’est fini!: He bothers the others a lot. It is finished!

qui parle anglais: who speaks English

5.4 The Vignettes

Rascal’s Song
A French Duck
Graduation Day
Home for Lunch
Mr. Whiskers
Cochon Anglais
Halloween Memories
Snow Banks in Spring
I Am the Teacher
Moncton, Saskatoon, and Vancouver
Ambushed
The Pre-School Life of Middle Son
Rolling in the Mud
Parent-Teacher Nightmares
Snow Pants and Lunches
A Broken Wrist
Uniforms
Individualized Education Plan
Mrs. Specialed
Belfast Revisited
Cultures Within Cultures
On Strike
What Lessons Can be Learned from A Christmas Concert?

Epilogue
Parent-Teacher Nightmares Continue
Janis Ian
On the Richter Scale
Mrs. Masters
The Last Parent-Teacher Nightmare
What's Wrong with this Picture?
Mr. Hockey
The Hyphenated Canadian Connection
The Stool and Disneyland
Another IEP
Humiliation and Betrayal
An Italian Angel
A Sense of Community
No Dogwood
A Space Circus
I Am a Penguin
Victim No More
Choosing Science Groups
Nicky Nicky Nine Door
Seven Syllables
Also Coincidently Italian
Falling
We Leave Nothing Unresolved
Advanced Placement

5.4.1 Rascal's Song

After that initial walk with Ballou et al in short order things settled into routine, at least until early December. I should tell more about the
community before I continue. This community located in Northwestern Ontario (population 2,000) was essentially a two industry town, mining and logging/forestry. All the management people from the mine lived on the same street. The men worked together; the women coffeed together; and the kids played together. It was like being in residence at university except with husbands, kids, and dogs. Colds and flu started at one end of the street and within a two- to three-week period headed up and down the street hitting every house. The community reflected the kind of ethnic makeup of many Canadian communities involved in these economic sectors: Ukrainian and other eastern Europeans, Newfoundlanders, Irish, French Canadians, and First Nations, quite often mixed together and indistinguishable: perogy sales, lobster feasts when some one was back from home, tourtière at Christmas, and bannock breakfasts. Everyone adopted, adapted, and shared. There were no secrets.

Although Ballou and I walked Eldest Son on the first day of school it wasn’t long before I was pushed to the side. Ballou was more welcomed. Across the street lived two little blonde girls with screeches that could shatter crystal. The older one started maternelle the same time as Eldest Son. Next door lived a couple with a son in jardin at the same school. The son was what my mother would have described as a “rascal”, a lively, active, and fun kid, with a hefty dose of mischievousness. My husband said he was “haywire”. It is impossible for me to think about Eldest Son’s first experiences
at school and my subsequent interactions with the school without telling the story of Rascal.

The jardin and maternelle classes were combined at the school and Rascal's aunt was the teacher. Although in rain or inclement weather Screecher's mother and I took turns dropping or picking up the kids, on nice days at some point they must have convinced us that they could take their bicycles. I remember vividly Rascal on a real two-wheeler, Eldest Son on a two-wheeler with training wheels still on, and Screecher on a tricycle setting off to school together, the ever present Ballou ensuring that school was the direction they headed.

Although Rascal's family had lived in town as long as we had, they had moved to our street only in the last year. At five years old Rascal was a year older than Eldest Son and they played together often. Together they had a fleet of Tonka trucks and had spent much of the previous summer operating a construction site (interestingly at 24 years old Eldest Son by profession is a project manager for a construction company) either on the beach or on a sand pile that sat between our house and Rascal's. I remember another time Rascal and Eldest Son were playing together in our basement. I had set up paints and easels for them. I heard a lot of commotion and they were laughing hysterically. I went downstairs to see what they were up to. They
had painted each other, face, hands, and arms. Their clothes had not escaped paint either and I hoped Rascal's mother would understand.

But as I said there were no secrets and Rascal had been diagnosed with leukemia for about six months when school had started that September. He was receiving chemotherapy in Thunder Bay at six week intervals or so, his hair had not fallen out, and things seemed to be going fine. In early November Rascal had been to Thunder Bay with his dad for treatment. When he came back he was out of school for a few days. Then he went back to school and everything seemed to be returning to normal as we shopped at The Bay for soon-to-be-needed snow suits and wondered if we could squeeze another year out of ski boots. Within a few days one of the jardin students came down with chicken pox. Immediately Rascal's mother pulled him out of school. The risk was simply too high, Rascal was banned too from playing with Eldest Son. A second and third child in the class got chicken pox. Neither Screecher nor Eldest Son did, but tragically, despite the precautions, Rascal did. They broke out on him on Saturday morning. Having just come from chemotherapy they ravaged him, in his throat, in his eyes, literally everywhere. He was taken to Thunder Bay immediately. By Wednesday morning he was medivaced from Thunder Bay to Toronto. He died shortly after arriving in Toronto.
I remember looking out the window and seeing the Mine Superintendent's wife who lived two doors down on the opposite side of us to Rascal carrying her two year old daughter and trotting alongside her was her four year old son. She was heading to my door and although outdoors in December she was wearing pink fuzzy slippers. As soon as I saw her face I knew. Her son too was a close playmate of Eldest Son. He was a quiet and shy child and a Protestant so had not started school with Ballou's bicycle brigade. He and Rascal were very different kids and had not struck up a friendship. Eldest Son had learned to alternate styles between the two.

I told Eldest Son right away what had happened. He was four years old, had been raised a Catholic and therefore I gave him some explanation of heaven. I did make it clear to him, though, that he would not be seeing Rascal again and that Rascal's parents were likely to be very sad. He went down stairs to watch TV and play with Mine Superintendent's son.

The next day Eldest Son, as well as everyone else, went to school. Soeur, the principal, filled in herself for Madame La Tante and talked to the class about what had happened. She gave the same kind of heaven-based Catholic explanation that I had given the night before. The next evening Eldest Son had a nightmare, unusual for him. He woke up and called for me. I went into his room. He was clearly agitated. He said he had been dreaming of skeletons. I let him come to our room and climb into bed between my
husband and myself. The next night another nightmare, this time he woke up shouting “dead, dead”. On Monday a note came home from the school saying that the school would be participating in Rascal’s funeral on Tuesday. I had a phone call from Soeur asking if Eldest Son would participate in the funeral by placing a rose on Rascal’s coffin. My husband had been asked by the family to be a pallbearer but I said ‘no” to Eldest Son’s participation. I felt he was too close. I hoped I had not offended.

Rascal’s mother was Québécoise, his father an Anglo Quebecer. I knew that in a French Canadian funeral the corpse plays a significant role as compared to British Columbian traditions. (I have yet to be at a British Columbia funeral where the corpse was even present.) In any case in French Canadian Catholic traditions an open coffin, even when its contents are a beautiful round-faced five year old child, is a mandatory sign of affection and respect. There is a gentle and loving relationship with the coffin contents. For example, photographs were taken of Rascal in the coffin. I struggled with my own beliefs, customs, and culture but in the end concluded that my four year old son was better off remembering his friend building a river with a garden hose rather than laying silent in a coffin. Eldest Son and most of the neighbourhood kids stayed at our house with a couple of volunteer sitters during the funeral.

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22 A statement that was true until December 3, 2008. I attended the Catholic funeral of my daughter-in-law’s grandmother. It was the first in ten funerals I have attended in B.C. in which a closed draped coffin was present.
In my whole life I will never forget Rascal's funeral at the small Catholic Church in this community. The coffin was open at the beginning of the service. You could see evidence of chicken pox but they were all but faded now. Finally, the family went forward for the last good-bye. They kissed him, Mom barely holding together. Then, Dad took a cloth clown that had a wind up nose that played music; he wound it up. He put it in the coffin beside Rascal. He closed the lid. From inside the coffin we could hear the muffled sound of the clown's music box nose.

On Thursday, two days later, my daughter was born. On Friday my first visitor at the hospital which was 115 km from where we lived was Rascal's mother. Courage, faith, incredible sadness.

5.4.2 French Duck

Christmas came and went and in January school reopened. I had a newborn baby and Eldest Son needed to become much more independent quickly. Screecher's mother thought it would be fair if she drove the kids to school in the morning and I picked them up at noon. The stress of dressing a two year old and a newborn to put them in the car to drive less than five minutes to the school was too much for me. After the first week I told Screecher's mother that Eldest Son would be walking to school. Sometimes she gave him rides, sometimes she didn't, but mostly he walked. Ballou would go with him in the morning then she would come back home. At 11:30
A.M. I would let her out and she would go back down to the school and wait for him by the fence.

How we were able to return so quickly to the routines of life I do not know. *Madame La Tante* was back in front of the class and the year progressed. Eldest Son remained a happy child willingly going off to school. In terms of school interaction after the events of early December I think I had one discussion with *Madame La Tante* which took place in church or at the grocery store. She was quite pleased with Eldest Son’s progress. He was a happy child; he seemed to be picking up French. She made him a tape with some vocabulary on it and said she would like him to listen to it and practice the words. I bought him a Fisher Price tape recorder and he listened to a Hulk Hogan tape instead.

I only remember one almost conflict with the school in this time period. Eldest Son had not completed an assignment in class time and it had been sent home for completion. He was to cut out pictures from a sheet of paper and then sort the items. There was a picture of a man (*homme, mari, papa*) and a picture of a woman (*dame, femme, maman*) and several pictures of objects and tools: a drill, an electric mixer, a saw, a sewing machine etc. The assignment was first, I am sure, to know the names of the objects and tools and second to cut and paste the picture of the man on one side of the paper with his appropriate tools and equipment and to cut and paste the
woman on the other side of the paper with her appropriate tools and equipment. Although the exercise offended my sense of what a child should be taught about gender roles I decided to cut Madame La Tante some slack and held my tongue.

At the end of the school year the jardin and maternelle parents were invited to the school for a spectacle. Eldest Son had told us that he was a duck and we had pretty clear instruction that he was to be dressed up in Sunday bests. I know my husband was in a suit and tie and I was in a dress. The children put on a play based on the story of “The Ugly Duckling”. The role of the Ugly Duckling was played by a jardin student whose mother tongue was French. He had a lot of lines and had them beautifully memorized. Eldest Son was one of the duck brothers and sisters. He had one line, “Quank, quank”, which apparently is what a French duck says. The event also served as the graduation ceremony for the jardin children. There were about five or six of them. The girls were in white caps and gowns, the boys were in black. Rascal’s mother was there too helping her sister Madame La Tante with the festivities.

5.4.3 Graduation Day

We spent the summer at the beach and in the backyard and soon it was fall again. About this time I went back to work. I had a sitter come to the house. Sometimes I drove the kids to school in the morning now, on my way
to work. Screecher's little sister was now going to maternelle as well.

Sometimes they walked and sometimes in the fall and spring at least they were on bicycles. The same brigade moved down the street as the previous year but this time Eldest Son and Screecher were on bicycles and Little Sister was on the tricycle, Ballou still the patient guide. Whether it was the chaos of my life at this moment, three kids five and under, two in diapers, relaunching a stalled career, or the constant concern that the mine might close; the fact of the matter is that I remember little of this year in terms of comings and goings at the school. Madame La Tante was still the teacher. Whenever I saw her, which was more likely next door rather than in some official school meeting, she remained positive about Eldest Son's scholastics. He was learning French. He had a concept of numbers. He was pleasant, cheerful, and sociable. She asked if we could begin reading to him in French, and I did.

In no time at all it was our turn for caps and gowns. This year instead of a play the jardin children each gave a recitation in French of course. Eldest Son was quite impressive. His French had progressed quite well and lucky for him as it turned out because by fall he was in school in the heart of Francophone Quebec.
5.4.4 **Home for Lunch**

In one of those strange coincidences unique to the experience of the nomads of the Canadian mining industry the only person we knew in our new community in Quebec (population 10,000. There was a mall and a Zellers!) was another one of *Madame La Tante's* and Rascal's mother's sisters. We had met *Troisième* at Rascal’s funeral. She was a unilingual Francophone and also a teacher. We sought her advice as to which school to put Eldest Son in. Naturally she thought he should go to the neighbourhood Francophone school which happened to be her school. She recommended against the English non-Catholic school, but did tell us that there was still an English Catholic school on the other side of town. Since both my husband and I had been educated in English in Canada we had English language rights in Quebec and so we decided to send Eldest Son there. The reason for this decision was that in a Francophone school in Quebec Eldest Son would have had no English instruction whatsoever. We were not confident enough in his skills or ours to take that particular plunge. After the initial interminable filing of documents that proved indeed we were Canadians educated in English I made an appointment to meet with the new teacher. Since our conversation with *Troisième* had been in French we weren’t too sure of all the exact details. The school building was large but, as we found out, it housed Board offices too. The school itself was quite small. The school held grades kindergarten to grade six. Grades K to 2 were in one room and 3 to 6 in another. There were fewer than 20 students in the whole school. The junior class teacher was a
woman around my age with a Scottish surname. Ms. Scot was an Anglo Quebecer and seemed kindly.

And so the second phase of our school lives began. In his French school in Ontario the language of the playground had been English, now Ms. Scot told us in his English school in Quebec the language of the playground was French. The only concern I had was that the school was on the other side of town and, for whatever reason, going home for lunch was mandatory. The children were given an hour and a half for lunch but could not stay at school over the lunch hour. Eldest Son was in grade one and if he had to walk it would take him half an hour to walk home, half an hour to eat lunch then half an hour to walk back. Winter comes early to this part of Quebec and besides he had to cross the main four-lane street of the town. For now at least, the bicycle was not an option. I thought it would be fine as it seemed unlikely, as I was not fully bilingual at this time, that I would be able to work. I assumed I would be able at least to drive him one way. However, within the first week the local Cree Band was looking for an English speaking accountant and immediately I was back to work.

I was not sure who the lunch rule was for, but one thing was certain, it was not for the children and it was not for the parents. The only bus that went to the school went from the military base and was operated by the base. At one time there had been a large military presence in the
community but it was much smaller now and that in part provided the explanation as to why in this part of Quebec such a large English Catholic school building existed in the first place. There were two base children who attended this school. A full size bus that was of a vintage to have seen service in Normandy or even Gallipoli dropped them in the morning, picked them up for lunch, and returned them in the afternoon. The rest of us, however, were on our own. I think I contemplated approaching the base about paying for bussing but either figured out or was told that insurance issues would never be resolved.

This community was quite far north and -30 °C for weeks in the winter was not to be unexpected. Some days Eldest Son did make the trek home for lunch. I had a unilingual Francophone sitter come to the house and he could go home and reasonably expect to be fed. Many days I picked him up for lunch and took him to a restaurant with me and probably returned him to the school earlier than they would have liked. Even though some urban parents will be horrified, I cannot tell a lie and despite the fact that he was only in grade one and two in these days, sometimes I gave him money and told him to go to the Zellers cafeteria for lunch. He did. If it still causes me twinges of conscience, it improved both his conversational French and his independence.
5.4.5  Mr. Whiskers

We had moved to Quebec on the first of November, two months into the school year. Ms. Scot sent home a list of school supplies to purchase and I tried to recycle what Eldest Son had had at the previous school. For the most part that was fine. There was one item that I did not know what it was. I cannot remember the name now but it was a French word—something like a cahier de catèchisme but it is possible that that is not the right word. After about two weeks Ms. Scot phoned me and told me how she thought Eldest Son was doing. She observed that he did not know the phonetic alphabet in English, only in French. She was not concerned about this. She noted that he could read some in French but he could not read in English. She thought though he would catch up easily. I would have to help him read at night. She would send home an extra set of the Readers they were using. She thought that although his French level was adequate for the present, she was concerned that he may not be able to keep up with the rest of the class as all the children were native French speakers. She suggested that we look for a tutor to provide him with some extra instruction in French. She thought it might help him make friends more easily too. She noted that his printing was not neat and tidy but typical of a south paw. She asked if I had not noticed on the school supply list that text books such as Readers were to be covered and that he needed a “that word” for religion class. I didn’t ask what a ‘whatever it was” was, I assumed I could figure it out.
She sent the Readers home. They were published by the Nelson Company, a series of three: *Surprise* called a pre-primer, *Mr. Whiskers* called a primer and *The Toy Box* called the grade one Reader. I noted the date of publication was 1970. *Mr Whiskers* looked pretty good for seventeen. Eldest Son learned to read English at the kitchen table and at school too, exactly the same way I had learned to read 30 years earlier. We approached *Troisième* again and she found us a tutor, a retired teacher. The tutor came to the house once a week for a couple of hours and Eldest Son’s French speaking, reading, and writing continued to improve. I covered the readers with paper. I asked Eldest Son if he could ask another student what a *cahier de catèchisme* was. He came home the next day and told me that it was a special kind of scribbler. I said he should just use a scribbler. He said, “No,” he “had to have a ‘whatever’”. Further, he was in a dither because obviously his informant had told him that I had not covered the books properly. I had no idea what he meant. He said they were to be covered “en plastique”. I wondered where on earth you would ever get a piece of plastic that was appropriate to cover a book with. “Saran Wrap wouldn’t work”, I thought to myself. I began to look around the house for such a piece of plastic but found nothing.

It must have been around this time that a parcel was delivered to the Band office where I had just started work, that was wrapped in plastic. I asked the receptionist if she could try to open the parcel and not harm the plastic. She was a fully trilingual Cree woman who had five children from
ages four to seventeen. She asked me what I wanted the plastic for. I explained to her. She asked me why I just didn't buy the plastic covers. I said that you would never be able to buy plastic book covers. She said you could. I asked her where. She said next door at the librairie as well as anywhere else school supplies were sold. I said I didn’t believe it. She said she would show me. There in the corner of the stationary store at least a meter high was a stack of plastic cut in rectangles the size to cover a text book with. I was stunned. I asked Trilingual why the school didn’t tell me that you could buy the plastic. She said because everyone knows. While we were there I asked her about the scribbler with the strange name. She showed me one. It was a scribbler in which the top half of the page was blank and the bottom half was lined. “It is for religion,” she explained. I dared not ask for any further explanation. The fact of the matter is in one trip to the librairie a trilingual Cree woman showed me how to cover a book with plastic, how to find a special scribbler for religion, and how to be a Quebecer.

Despite the fact that I said nothing more to Trilingual about the religion scribbler, I have not stopped thinking about it. Does it not seem odd that of all the subjects, religion is the one that had the special scribbler with this particular format? Wouldn’t it make more sense for arithmetic or science? Maybe the paper was blessed by the Pope. What do you suppose the children did with it? Draw a picture of God, colour it and then write about Him below. If I have not solved this particular cultural mystery at least I
know why Mr. Whiskers looked so good at seventeen, sixteen years “en plastique”.

5.4.6 Cochon Anglais

Moving to the heart of francophone Quebec had felt like the opportunity of a lifetime and for the most part it was. Eldest Son was happy at school. He joined the figure skating club, signed up for ski alpin lessons at the local ski hill, and everything seemed to be falling into place. We all learned French quickly here. You had to. Ninety-eight percent of the Caucasian inhabitants did not speak English. My husband was working in French and was taking French lessons. He picked up the vocabulary but not the accent. His accent continued to be as he was taught in high school in Halifax. He probably knew more words then I did but I picked up the Québécois twang. By February I was in a shouting match over the phone in French with the local hardware store over an invoice that had been incorrectly issued to the Band office. Eldest Son though was definitely the most bilingual of all of us. There was a little girl in his skating group who did not speak French at all. His coach did not speak any English and now at the ripe old age of six he was the translator. He made friends too with Francophone children. There was a little redheaded freckled boy who lived two doors down who was in kindergarten at Eldest Son’s school. He spoke little English and they played together in French. There was another boy his age in his skating group and they became friends too. Patineur was a
unilingual Francophone. Sometimes Eldest Son would come through the door speaking French. Eldest Son always was and still is a social butterfly. Socializing was and is the most important thing to him. He was and is good at it. It is why the next event came as a great shock to him and to me.

It really stemmed from what to do with the one-and-a-half hour lunch. I did not often go home for lunch because it was disruptive to the two younger children and the sitter. As luck would have it on this particular day in late February I had gone home. I suspect that I was going to one of the reserves or something and was changing clothes. In any case I was there over the lunch hour. I saw Eldest Son getting ready to go back to school. I had not noticed that he was particularly agitated over the lunch hour. When he was getting ready to go he went into the kitchen and I saw him slip two table knives into his sac à dos. I asked him what he was doing, why he was taking the knives. He said two kids had been teasing him on the way home. They chased him, they washed his face with snow, and they threw snow balls at him. He said they called him a cochon anglais. He said they were going to be waiting for him and he was going to fight back because he was not a cochon anglais. He was not crying, but he had a look of icy determination. I asked him if he knew who they were. He said they went to the neighbourhood French school. One of their names was Some Name and the other one who was bigger and the real aggressor had a manteau gris. He thought they looked like they must be in about grade five. I told him that it was not
appropriate to resolve this kind of incident by fighting back especially using weapons (in truth the table knives probably couldn't have cut a slice of bologna). I told him I would drive him back to school and that I would go to the French school and report what had happened to the principal.

I walked into the French school and despite the fact that the building was probably 20 to 30 years old the school itself was immaculate. I have never been in a school so clean and tidy. It was winter. The school was full of children. Still it sparkled and shone. Clearly someone cared deeply about it. I made my way to the office and asked to speak to the principal. The entire conversation took place in French. A plain grey-haired woman appeared and she introduced herself as Soeur Someone. I told Soeur what had happened. I said that some children from her school had ambushed my six-year-old grade one son on his way home from lunch. They chased him, washed his face with snow, threw snowballs at him, called him a *cochon anglais* and threatened that they would be waiting for him after lunch. I said that I was not too pleased that my son was so scared that he felt he had to take knives. She asked me if I knew who they were. I said that one name was Some Name and the ringleader had a *manteau gris*. She said that she already had a pretty good idea who they were, that she would investigate, and that it would not happen again. She said that this behaviour was not acceptable at her school. I left believing that she would deal with the situation.
A couple of days later *Manteau Gris* and Some Name came to the door. They rang the doorbell. They said in English that they were sorry. The problem was that the person who answered the door was my unilingual Francophone babysitter who had no idea what they were saying. She asked them in French what they wanted. Before they answered in French they looked to the end of the driveway where a plainly dressed grey-haired woman was standing. They told the sitter Soeur told them to apologize in English. She said she accepted the apology. Never mind the mistaken identity between me and the sitter, the fact of the matter is, the person who truly deserved the apology was a cheerful, happy, social, bilingual six-year old butterfly. Not a *cochon anglais* at all. It was a gain for intolerance and a loss for innocence.

### 5.4.7 Halloween Memories

Living in Quebec also brought with it some customs and traditions that had been in existence when I was a child in school but that had long been forgotten in most parts of Canada, likely because of greater American cultural influences. One such custom we discovered two moves later was also alive and well in Newfoundland. That custom was the referencing of the teacher. In both Newfoundland and Quebec a female teacher was referred to as Miss and a male teacher was referred to as Sir. The full name Ms. Scot or Mr. Anyname was never used. For example, the senior grades teacher in this school was male and I remember Eldest Son telling me one day, “Sir said
Richard and I could play with the basketball after school if we put it away”. I remember a conversation between my children in Newfoundland when one said, “My Miss said that the busses will be coming early on Thursday”.

Another tradition that was alive and well in Quebec was the inviting of younger brothers and sisters to school for the Halloween Party. This was a time-honoured tradition when I was a child and it is one of my earliest memories. I was delighted therefore to receive the invitation to take Eldest Son’s two younger siblings to school for Halloween, known as Fête de Masques in Francophone Quebec. I wondered if this would be one of their earliest memories too.

I would have been four years old; the year would have been 1955. In my era when you started school it was into grade one. There was no kindergarten in the rural one room school house where I attended school. In fact when I started school in September of 1956 it was, albeit a one room school, into a brand new school. But the Halloween Party the previous year was held in the Old School. It was the same school that my father had attended. He was born in 1909. I remember sharing the school seat of my oldest sister. She is four years older than I so she must have been in grade three. She seemed much more mature to me than that then. There were the old fashioned wooden seats that were bolted in rows to the floor, seats and desks attached; the seat could fold up when you got up. I wonder why? The
desk had an ink well and there was cast iron on the sides to the compartment in which the books were put. My sister tucked me in beside her. We were both in costume; I can’t remember what the costumes were now but for sure in our case they were homemade. Halloween usually involved a trip to the attic and a look through the “rag bag” for a costume. No masks. My parents were too no-nonsense and quite frankly probably too poor for such foolishness. Sir had a desk at the front and was on a wooden platform. On the day of the Halloween Party most of the activities took place on the platform. There was a wash tub (my mother’s) that was used for bobbing for apples. I remember one of the big boys, in grade eight, maybe it was Peter Murray, bobbing for the apple. He was determined and he came up gasping. I was scared a little that I might have to do it and I did not want to be gasping the way Peter was. There was another contest of apples on a string hanging from the ceiling and you had to eat it with your hands behind your back. I remember Rob Jamison who was in the same grade as my sister eating the whole apple. I suppose he won the contest. But the thing I remember most about the Halloween Party was the treats. I don’t know if they have a name or not but someone had brought the “store bought” cookies that have a cookie on the bottom, then pink marshmallow on the top and toasted coconut on the outside. In my homemade world, never before had I seen or tasted anything so luxurious and exotic.
When I got the invitation for the Quebec Halloween Party, I immediately scoured Provigo and Métro for those cookies. I can’t remember if I found them or not, but to my disappointment Eldest Son brought a notice home saying I was to bring vegetables. If I recall correctly masks were, if not forbidden, discouraged. They were too hot for the children and too distracting. Eldest Son dressed as a shepherd (as in the Nativity). (Remember he was in Catholic School!) Middle Son was a magician with a painted-on beard and daughter was a witch with painted-on glasses. We did not play any of the frightening apple games that I had witnessed but we did do some Halloween crafts and the school children entertained us with a song or two. There were no exotic luxurious cookies but with my vegetable tray I did manage to commit a cultural faux pas. When making a vegetable tray in Quebec it was clearly not the custom to put green pepper strips among the vegetables. Broccoli, yes, cauliflower yes, carrots yes, celery yes, but each and every child asked his or her mother what the peppers were. Clearly in Quebec they were something you cooked. I took home a lot of green peppers that night. To make matters worse neither my husband nor any of my kids will eat coconut. What’s wrong with them?

5.4.8 Snow Banks in Spring

The amount of snow that fell in this community was remarkable. The city had a couple of pieces of specialized equipment that helped control the amount of snow that built up in banks on the street. They had at least
two gigantic snow blowers that looked more like combines on the prairie than anything else. At first they would plough the streets just like every other Northern Canadian community, pushing the snow onto boulevards between the street and the sidewalks. But after a few storms the snow banks would be eight to 10 feet high and there would be just no more room. When it got to this stage the city crews would relocate the 10-foot high banks into the middle of the road. Next the snow harvest would begin. The blowers would move along with dump trucks following, blowing the snow into the trucks. After the next few snow storms the process on each street would begin again. Sometime towards spring the harvest would stop and the banks on the boulevard would build up again and this time their removal would be by means of the spring melt.

Over the period of the two years, I had gotten to know Ms. Scot a little better. This was not primarily a result of her role as Eldest Son's teacher but because she had taken the initiative to introduce Eldest Son to her son of the same age and they had become regular playmates. On one occasion less than halfway through our first year in Quebec she had observed to me casually that she noticed that Eldest Son was hanging around with one of the grade four students in the school, a fellow mining kid and a native English speaker. She let me know subtly that she did not approve of this friendship but she clearly did understand (somewhat) the pleasure of playing in your own language. Her son attended a Francophone school but he too was
a native English speaker and she suggested that Eldest Son come for a play date. The two boys hit it off and thereafter there were back and forth visits.

It was why I was somewhat surprised by the tone in her voice when she called me at work late in the afternoon one very sunny day in early spring. She said that the school must be advised when a student will not be returning from lunch. She said I was supposed to call or send a note. I said I wasn't planning on not sending Eldest Son to school after lunch any day soon. She said he had not returned that day. I called the sitter. She said he had gone to school. I got in the car and began looking for him. I started at the school and tried to retrace his route. About halfway home I found him. He had a stick in his hand and you could see that for the last several blocks he had been pushing the stick into the snow bank and creating springs, rivulets of water, like leaks in a mighty white dyke. He was doing what any child would do on the first gloriously sunny day in spring after a long harsh winter. I asked him if he realized what time it was. He said no. I telephoned Ms. Scot at school, told her I had found him, assured her that I would speak to him about the incident, and asked her to reinforce the lesson.

5.4.9 I Am the Teacher

Eldest Son and I were both pretty good at speaking French by the time we were getting ready to leave Quebec. I know this because I remember an incident that occurred one day when Freckles from two doors down was
playing with Eldest Son in the backyard. Freckles had two sisters but there was a complicated family arrangement and the sisters lived in the Abitibi and only visited for the summer. Freckles lived with his grandmother and his father. The elder of the two girls was a couple of years older than Eldest Son. She was very pretty and very Québécoise. She would come to play sometimes too. One late summer afternoon just before we moved back to Ontario I heard a commotion in the backyard. There was some screaming. The next thing Très Belle came through the back door and she had clearly been sprayed by the garden hose. In very excited French she told me that that she was telling on Eldest Son, that he had sprayed her with the hose, and that I should punish him. I called Eldest Son to the door. He and Freckles both appeared. They too were soaking wet. They said she sprayed them first. I asked her if that was true. She said it was. I said that I was not going to punish Eldest Son, that if she was going to spray him, she had to expect that he was going to spray her back. She was outraged and stormed home. The amazing part of this was that the entire conversation including my conversation with my own son had taken place in French.

But we were on the move again and back to Ontario. All our French was not lost though, as the community we moved to in Northern Ontario (population 45,000) was 60% French and 40% English. When we first went there, sometimes we spoke French, sometimes we spoke English, forgetting that we no longer needed to speak French everywhere we went.
Although only Eldest Son had been in school in Quebec, back in Ontario because of maternelle/ junior kindergarten all three kids were old enough for school. We lived right at the mine site and there was a total of 18 houses on the site. In Ontario, education, at least in this community, was about choice. You could choose from Public or Separate schools and in each religion category you could choose a language category English, French, or Immersion. The mine site was on the outskirts of a suburb and for either Separate Immersion or Public French the children were bussed into the city centre some 20 kilometres. But for this we might have been tempted to put Eldest Son in Separate Immersion. Instead we decided he was better off going to school a little closer to home. Eldest Son and Middle Son were enrolled in Separate English School. Middle Son was the age for kindergarten, had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder at two years old, and had refused to learn French in Quebec. It made sense to choose a school that was not likely to present too many obstacles. When I went to register the children, I found out that if Daughter, who was only three, was registered in junior kindergarten at the same school as Middle Son, then he would go in the morning and she would go in the afternoon. As a working mother I couldn’t make sense of that and so I went to the Separate French school board office, spoke my very best French, found out that since I had already had a child registered in a French school in Ontario that I had French language rights, and enrolled Daughter there because at the French
Separate school *maternelle* was in the morning too. She did both speak and understand French. In fact she had spoken French words before she spoke English words. Her first word had been “chaude.” Both her French and mine passed muster and we were registered.

The schools were about four to five kilometres away and so the children were bussed. Although there were two distinct school boards, Public and Separate, all the children from the mine were bussed on the same bus, and, yes, amongst the 18 families at the mine site there were children attending each of the six elementary schools. All three of my children in school felt like it should have been a watershed moment but it did seem strange that although Middle Son and Daughter were 23 months apart, they were starting school the same day. The true watershed moment came later.

Two days before school started the phone rang and a woman’s voice in English surprisingly said, “My name is English First Name, French Last Name and I am So and So’s teacher.” Since there was no So and So living at our house I said, “I am sorry, you have the wrong number.” A few minutes later the phone rang again and the same voice this time said, “I am Daughter’s teacher.” She asked me why I had said it was the wrong number the first time. I said because she had not said Daughter’s name but that she had said another name. She said I must be off tonight because she had said the right name and I must be just not prepared for Daughter to go to school.
Her remarks were quite pointed. She then gave me a list of school supplies and other instructions about bussing and the first day. It was not a good start.

5.4.10  **Moncton, Saskatoon, and Vancouver**

For the first few months I continued to work as a consultant for my previous employer so occasionally went back to Quebec but basically worked from home. The kids were on the bus in the morning and I was able to calmly supervise the chaos of getting them ready. Skating, swimming lessons, Cubs, and Mass took up any spare time. Eldest Son had made friends aplenty both at school and on the mine site and he settled in quickly. I met his teacher and although she didn’t exactly strike me as the caring type she was well seasoned and I heard no complaint from him. Middle Son had a pleasant gentle woman whose husband was a well-known professional in the city. Mrs. Known I think could be fairly described as caring. Going into the parent-teacher night season I’d heard nothing about any issues Middle Son was having. He had made a few friends from his class and at the mine site. Daughter said little about school one way or the other although the fact that she went willingly was a good sign. She had made a friend of one little boy whose mother was actually the French teacher of the two boys. I think he was in her skating group too and they had a few play dates back and forth.
Parent-Teacher Night was, from my perspective at least, for the most part a non-event. Eldest Son was a very good reader, keeping up in mathematics, interested in social studies, and an untidy printer and writer. Middle Son was adapting to the classroom and Mrs. Known seemed fine with his progress. Daughter understood French, there was no issue there, but she was having trouble with the ordinary events of the classroom like putting her shoes on. Madame LaPointe showed me some of Daughter’s work as compared to the work of another child. She was not colouring in the lines. I pointed out that Daughter was an end of December baby and was, even as we spoke, just three years old. I was somewhat concerned after the parent-teacher night.

Eldest Son, now in grade three, was starting to have both real homework and tests. He was far too social to spend a lot of time doing or preparing for either one. I tried to get involved and settle him into the kind of routine I knew was needed to really succeed in school. My success was limited. In any case I did help him study one night for a social studies test on the capitals of Canadian Provinces. He asked me to ask him. We started in the east. The capital of Newfoundland is St. John’s. The capital of Prince Edward Island is Charlottetown. The capital of Nova Scotia is Halifax. So far so good. “The capital of New Brunswick is Moncton,” he said. “No,” I said, “it’s Fredericton”. He looked at his paper the teacher had given him. “See”, he said, “you are wrong and it is Moncton”. I looked at the paper and went
through the list. Not only was New Brunswick wrong but also Saskatchewan and British Columbia. These were pre-Internet days so I got out an atlas and showed Eldest Son: Fredericton, Regina, and Victoria. He became very agitated. He told me he didn’t care what I said or what the atlas said he was not going to get in trouble and he was going to put on the test what the teacher had written down. He treated me as if I was acting like a “know it all”. I told him I was going to stop by the school the next morning and talk to Mrs. Seasoned. The teachable moment for him on this subject had long passed and he went downstairs to play video games. I went the next morning and told Mrs. Seasoned, if not the error, the geography. She did not seem particularly embarrassed but treated me much the same as Eldest Son had the night before, like I was a “know it all”. I asked Eldest Son when he got home if she told the class that she had taught them the wrong capitals. He said no, she hadn't said anything. She gave the test. I assumed then that for New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and British Columbia either Moncton, Saskatoon, and Vancouver or Fredericton, Regina, and Victoria were acceptable if not correct answers. I did not ask Eldest Son how he had answered. I knew. The harm done here on the surface was not significant. Thirty adults somewhere in Northern Ontario don’t know the provincial capitals, but down the road both my children and I paid the price for the intervention with Mrs. Seasoned. The fact remains, however, that Moncton,
Saskatoon, and Vancouver are all interesting and beautiful cities but they are not provincial capitals.

### 5.4.11 Ambushed

Fall became winter and winter became spring. I was back working for an employer in the nearby city. Usually I dropped the children at their schools in the morning on my way to work and then the two youngest ones would take a bus at noon to the municipal daycare. Eldest Son would take the bus to the daycare after school. Sometimes if I was going too early they would take the bus from the mine site to their respective schools. They seemed like fairly complicated arrangements for four- and five-year-old children but they rose to the occasion and the routine worked. It was convenient that the schools permitted the children to take a different bus after school than the route they took in the morning dropping them conveniently at the daycare. This is not the case I found out later in most of the civilized world.

Shortly after Christmas I was called by Madame LaPointe and she said she continued to have concerns about Daughter’s classroom habits and her fine and gross motor skills. She told me there was a paediatric specialist associated with McMaster University coming to town and that I should make an appointment. Daughter had been born during rapid labour and I knew that there were concerns right from the beginning about fine motor skills. She did not walk until 16 months. She was also very tall. I said I would and
did. Dr. McMaster said he would like to have her assessed by a team of therapists in Toronto and he made arrangements for her to be assessed at Scarborough General Hospital. I took her to Toronto. She was put in a room with two very happy cheerful therapists who had her do a number of tasks, putting pegs in holes, catching a ball, rolling on the floor, and the like. I saw a copy of the report that they prepared for Dr. McMaster. It basically said that she was a pleasant cooperative child who willingly tried really hard at the tasks they had given her. They said that relatively speaking she had slightly poorer than average gross and fine motor skills. Dr. McMaster told me he didn't know if it was the circumstances of her birth or that she was just big, awkward, and clumsy; it would make no difference to her. She would simply have to learn to cope with the way she was and that was that. Since Madame LaPointe had requested that I see Dr. McMaster, I shared the information with the school. Looking back that may have been a mistake but nonetheless it was what I did. I didn't think at the time that pleasant, cooperative, willing, awkward, and clumsy were terrible things to be.

In early May I received another call from Madame LaPointe and she said she would like to have a conversation about placement of Daughter for next year. The meeting was arranged for the Board office which I found odd. I was shocked to find at least seven other people present besides me. I was shown to my seat at the table. There were eight seats, two end seats and three seats along each side. I was shown the middle seat on one of the sides. I
was surrounded. I knew what this configuration meant as I had used it myself in situations where subtle intimidation might help the process along and I was not comfortable. I am not sure who all the players were that were present that day: Madame LaPointe, Soeur Principal, a couple of professionals (psychologist maybe, child and youth worker maybe), administrative professionals from the Board office et al. The conversation was in English. A woman at one of the ends of the table started to speak. She said, “Since I am the advocate for this child I will begin”. Wait, I thought to myself, I am the mother, shouldn’t I be the advocate for this child? She said we should listen to what Madame LaPointe had to say. Madame LaPointe said that although the child was a native English speaker she had been raised in Quebec and that language was not particularly the issue. It was not that Daughter did not understand instructions in the classroom; it was that she did not follow them. (Is this the same child that the Scarborough therapists had described as pleasant, cooperative and willing?) She didn’t always change her shoes from outdoor shoes to indoor shoes, sometimes she didn’t flush the toilet after use, her nose was runny and she didn’t use a tissue, she couldn’t colour inside the lines, she couldn’t use scissors properly, she was larger than the other children, and she didn’t seem to know the social boundaries of her space. Each person spoke about the inadequacies of Daughter as a human being—at least that was what it sounded like to me.

My beautiful precious child! I hadn’t recalled being asked permission to have
Daughter observed in the classroom by professionals but I may have given it or maybe my permission was not necessary. Finally the gentleman, the Board administrator type, at the head of table summed up the recommendations. Next year Daughter should be placed in the English Separate School as language was a complication that was not needed in this case, that she should repeat Junior Kindergarten, that there was a Children's Resource Centre in town, and that she should be treated there. In fact, she could start now for the remainder of the school year, three afternoons a week, as there was an opening. I was never once asked to speak or even given the courtesy of being asked my opinion. It was over and it was done. I was humiliated, embarrassed, and ashamed, and by the time I got to the car, weeping uncontrollably. I had been ambushed.

5.4.12 The Pre-School Life of Middle Son

Before I continue I think that it is very important to relate the events of Middle Son's pre-school life. Middle Son was born in January, a full term pregnancy, a perfect score of 10 on the test that is given to new born babies. He weighed a little over 8 lbs. He jaundiced quite soon after birth and there was minor concern as he does not share my blood type. These suspicions were, however, unfounded as the jaundice proved to be normal baby jaundice but the hospitalization was one week because of the jaundice levels.
Middle Son was breast-fed and nursed every two hours for the first month. At the end of one month he weighed 14 lbs. Otherwise his early infancy was unremarkable.

At age 5 months Middle Son was diagnosed as having strabismus. (Eldest Son had also been surgically treated for strabismus.) His surgery was performed at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto by the Chief of the Eye Clinic. The first surgery was performed at 6 months of age and the second at 8 months. The surgery was successful and the admission routine for strabismus cases. The weight gain in early infancy had stopped as the Sick Children's admission records showed at the first surgical admission Middle Son weighed 16 lbs.

As an infant Middle Son was a relatively easy baby. He was not particularly fussy. He slept for four hours at a time in the night by about six weeks. He liked being in the baby swing which made meal times tolerable. Things changed once he was mobile. As compared to Eldest Son, the moment that Middle Son walked he was into everything. He poked at the stereo, he pulled things off the table, and he had no fear of the stairs. If he wanted to go somewhere or get something he did it. I remember being at the beach one day with Mine Superintendent's wife, her two children, Eldest Son, and Middle Son. It was a great sand beach, the water was shallow and the kids with life jackets on could play quite comfortably near the water's edge. Middle Son
would just run into the water. He didn't care. He would sometimes end up face down in the water with only the life jacket keeping him floating. We would run in and pull him out and he would do it again. Mine Superintendent's wife couldn't believe it. She looked at him and looked at me and said, “That's crazy!” I wondered if she meant Middle Son or the experience of taking him to the beach or both. I didn't ask.

At 16 months of age Middle Son was hospitalized for one week at a local hospital for gastroenteritis. This hospital was not particularly well equipped for a paediatric admission and the nurses found Middle Son to be active. At 20 months of age we were shopping in a neighbouring community when Middle Son took a peculiar attack or spell. He suddenly started screaming in a panic-like state followed by a trance state slipping into an unusual sleep. We took him to the emergency ward of the local hospital and the duty doctor thought it was some sort of idiosyncratic food allergy and since we had eaten at McDonald's it might be food additive related. The "attack" passed in about 20 minutes. It did mercifully keep us out of McDonald's restaurants for several years.

Around the same time, Middle Son developed an eczema-like rash on his face, hands, arms, and legs. On several occasions, two or three at least, he was taken to the medical clinic to have the rash examined. After several
different ointments and combinations of ointments with no success he was referred to a paediatrician in Thunder Bay.

The visit with the paediatrician took place at 25 months of age. Middle Son and I were shown into the examining room. We waited there until the doctor came in, about 15 minutes later. Middle Son removed all the contents of the drawers in the tables. He ripped the posters off the walls. I put them back but he pulled everything down again. When the doctor came in he asked why he was seeing Middle Son today. I asked about the rash. The paediatrician said he thought the rash was caused by food allergies and "so is this behaviour". Middle Son was to be put on the Feingold diet for a period of six months. The diet is very restrictive consisting of only natural foods, only certain fruits (e.g. pears, bananas, and pineapple), and no artificial flavours or colours. We made several trips to Minnesota (about 180 km away) to obtain dairy products without colour additives as Minnesota regulations were more restrictive at the time than Ontario regulations. Within 72 hours of being on the diet Middle Son's rash disappeared but his behaviour did not change at all.

The paediatrician also referred Middle Son to the Infant Development Programme. A worker was assigned and she began visiting once per week. She had Middle Son do Bailey's tests and also recommended that he be assessed by a psychologist. The psychologist thought Middle Son to
have classic Attention Deficit Disorder and recommended that we see a paediatrician and have him put on Ritalin. Middle Son was prescribed Ritalin. At the time I was working at the medical clinic and Middle Son's behaviour problems were discussed at length both formally and informally with a number of the local doctors.

Middle Son was given Ritalin but getting the dosage right was tricky business. It seemed he was hallucinating at times and in consultation with one of the clinic doctors who knew us and our circumstances well, it was discontinued. Middle Son's behaviour continued to be impulsive and defiant. He was enrolled in nursery school but after a couple of weeks of experience with him he was allowed to attend only if the Infant Development Programme provided an aide to attend to him. This was arranged.

Once we arrived in Quebec, since the sitter came to the house, we thought it would be a good time to try the Ritalin again. He was given Ritalin again for three months. He sat and stared out the window or he just sat and stared. He did not play. He did not run around. He just sat. In addition to having the sitter come to the house, Middle Son was taken to a gardarie two afternoons a week so that he might have the opportunity to interact with other children. While there were a few problems created by language as the montrices spoke only French and Middle Son only English things went apparently smoothly until spring.
On one occasion in April when I went to pick Middle Son up at the gardarie he was nowhere to be seen. The chief montrice at the gardarie was visibly shaken and asked me to come aside as she wished to speak to me. Although up to now all conversations had been conducted in French, Montrice had asked another mother who was perfectly bilingual to translate. The conversation began, "What is the matter with this child?" I explained that he was diagnosed as Attention Deficit Disorder and that up until February he had been given drugs but the decision had been taken to stop this. At this point a woman named Enseigneur was introduced. She was in charge of the nursery school and she said she would like to work with Middle Son half an hour each day before he went to the gardarie. (The two groups were across the hall from each other.) Although Montrice knew a few basic English words (Stop! No!) useful in getting Middle Son’s attention, Enseigneur did not. She was completely totally unilingual Francophone. Enseigneur did have some sort of specialized training in dealing with active children and she did work with Middle Son on a one-on-one basis for half an hour two mornings a week for April, May, and June. Her techniques involved relaxation techniques.

In September, Middle Son started attending the nursery school two mornings per week. After four weeks when I arrived to pick him up his bag was packed with all his nursery school supplies in it. Enseigneur handed it to me and somewhat angrily said, "Il dérange les autres beaucoup. C'est fini!"
Montrice at the gardarie agreed to take Middle Son back under very limited conditions. We decided again to try the medical profession.

We spoke to our family doctor who advised that there was a paediatrician coming to town “qui parle anglais” and he would refer Middle Son to her. The paediatrician thought that Middle Son was charming and adventuresome and that he should be put in all sorts of activities to wear him out and that would work and everything would be fine.

In late summer we moved back to Ontario. Immediately upon arriving I made contact with the youth and child services as I anticipated that Middle Son might have problems in school and the disruptive behaviour continued at home. By mid-February of the year when Mrs. Known was the teacher, it was deemed that Middle Son was managing in school. The next summer Middle Son attended a YMCA day camp for two weeks while he stayed with his maternal grandmother. The remainder of the summer he attended a day camp programme at a day care. Both places reported that on occasion Middle Son refused to participate in the activities offered and there were some problems with him relating to the other children.

He began grade one. Concerned about his behaviour, we contacted the school or the teacher on many occasions. Although we had not particularly heard from the teacher, others associated with the school such as
the bus driver and Eldest Son reported issues concerning Middle Son’s behaviour on the bus, in the bus line-up, and in the school yard.

5.4.13 Rolling in the Mud

I was trying so hard to hold “normal” together. We were a normal family doing normal things. I so much wanted to believe that. One November morning in the next school year, all that came crashing down. Eldest Son was in grade four, Middle Son was in grade one, and Daughter was in Junior Kindergarten. For the first time and one of only three years in total, all three kids were in the same school, the English Separate School. Daughter had Mrs. Known for a teacher, Middle Son had a very experienced grade one teacher who wore brightly coloured clothing, and Eldest Son, for the first time, had a male teacher.

I was barely at work one morning when I received a call from the principal. He said that I needed to come to the school. He said that Middle Son had rolled in the mud. He said that I should come to his office. I was annoyed that I had been called from work. I was thinking on the way, “Doesn’t the school have any responsibility at all? He was in their charge when he rolled in the mud”. It was not the right thing to be thinking. When I got to the school I went to see Mr. Office. Middle Son was not in sight. I sat down and he closed the door. He said that the school was very concerned about Middle Son’s behaviour. He asked me rhetorically what could possibly
be the reason that a grade one student would intentionally roll in the mud?
The teacher on yard duty, who incidentally had been Mrs. Seasoned (you remember, provincial capitals) had said that he had intentionally rolled in the mud; he had not fallen or accidentally come upon it some other way. He said that Mrs. Bright had also said that she was having problems with Middle Son in class. He didn’t elaborate what the problems were. I said that I had shared information with the school that Middle Son had Attention Deficit Disorder. I had shared both the diagnosis documents and a psychological assessment that had been done when he was two years old. I said that I had not heard from Mrs. Bright and that his teacher last year Mrs. Known had not had any particular issues with Middle Son. He told me that the behaviour expected in a kindergarten classroom and a grade one classroom were two completely different things. The fact that Mrs. Known had not made any comment about Middle Son’s behaviour should not be used as a guide in the present situation. He said that the truth of the matter was that the school was very concerned about the parenting style in the home. He said that based on Middle Son’s behaviour he wondered if there was any discipline in the home at all. He said he highly recommended parenting classes. He said again that there is just no explanation for Middle Son intentionally rolling in the mud.

Perhaps it was supposed to be offering help. As a result of this incident we did actively try to seek help both through social agencies and the
medical profession. Middle Son went again to a child and youth agency. On one occasion I left him there for a half hour with a counsellor. When I came back she was very upset that Middle Son had taken all the toys out and would not put them back. She told me to make him put them back. This was helping? I never went back. We tried any number of newly taught if not learned parenting skills. I used stickers on the calendar for all three kids. It was in February and I used valentines. Each child had assigned tasks: taking plates off the table, hanging jackets up, simple things. There was to be a reward at the end of the month. Eldest Son and Daughter each achieved their rewards and bought a toy. Middle Son, as soon as he saw his opportunity, took both toys and broke them. The next month I used shamrocks on the calendar and I made it easier. Daughter and Eldest Son had more complex tasks but Middle Son only needed to take his shoes off when he came through the door, which was something he always did anyway. Except of course for this month. He refused. The reward was to go out for Sunday Brunch. We went. I still have the stickers of Easter bunnies for April.

Eventually I took Middle Son to a psychologist at a university in the nearest larger city. The diagnosis was exactly the same as it had been three years earlier. Middle Son had Attention Deficit Disorder. He scored in the 96th percentile. His verbal skills were above average; his mathematical reasoning was on the low side of average. He couldn't read social situations very well. I said to the psychologist, “We need help”. He said, “Accept him as
he is and get on with your lives”. After the rolling in the mud incident we did really try to get help. We eventually came to the conclusion that there is no help. I remember saying to my husband one night in despair, “No one helps”. I cannot describe to you the tremendous sense of isolation we felt. We thought a lot about our responsibilities to this child and these children. We felt constantly like we were being blamed. This was the watershed moment. Our life was clearly divided into two parts before rolling in the mud and after. For us there was never to be normal, only survival.

5.4.14 Parent-Teacher Nightmares

In late January I attended a Parent-Teacher night. I started off in Daughter’s classroom. Mrs. Known, as ever, was positive and pleasant as I entered the classroom. She showed me a chair that I was supposed to sit down in. It was a kindergarten chair. I was embarrassed but I said I preferred to stand. Daughter had continued attending the Children’s Resource Centre programmes and Mrs. Known had no particular complaint. Mrs. Bright said that Middle Son was one of the better readers in the class; she just didn’t know where he had learned to read because it wasn’t in her classroom. She said that it was not that he was particularly disruptive in the classroom; it was simply that he was not engaged. He played with toys or he drew pictures. As I already knew and she reminded me, the real behavioural issues were in the playground and on the school bus. He was a “show off” and he was defiant. In Eldest Son’s classroom I heard about an intelligent,
articulate child who did not seem particularly motivated in his school work but preferred socializing to academics.

I began to dread Parent-Teacher Nights. Daughter summarized years later for me the message I heard: “Mrs. Hibbitts, your children are useless and no good”. The one positive feature of the night was the ability to go through the school’s lost and found. Middle Son was notorious for losing mittens. He rebelled against what, as a result of Bill Cosby’s comedy routines on the album called Why is there Air? I and everyone of my generation referred to as idiot mitten strings. For the entire winter I made weekly trips to Giant Tiger and bought 15 pairs of mittens a week paying no more than $1.69 per pair. During the course of the week Middle Son would lose them, sometimes on the bus, sometime at the neighbours’, sometimes at school. The school’s lost and found was like a treasure chest; 75% of the objects in it were mine.

5.4.15 Snow Pants and Lunches

The next year things went from bad to worse. Middle Son, now in grade two, was assigned Mrs. Seasoned as a teacher. She must have bought a book on “How to Manage an A.D.D Child in the Classroom” because she experimented with a number of approaches. But in the end she was strict and she expected compliance. She had a little note book that was broken down in 10-minute intervals and she would check to see if Middle Son was on task. If
she couldn’t be checking constantly she had a grade six student act as an aide in the classroom and check on his ability to stay on task. She had him and us sign a homework contract. We signed and I genuinely tried. I would sit with him at the kitchen table for hours on end to do maybe five arithmetic sums or write three words. He absolutely refused. In the end he would be crying, I would be crying, and the whole family would be sucked into the homework vortex. One day after a several hour struggle Eldest Son grabbed the sheet and wrote the answers. The next day Mrs. Seasoned complained that the homework was too untidy. Not to be wrongfully accused of something he didn’t do, Middle Son volunteered that Eldest Son had written the answers and we were in trouble again. Middle Son, and probably rightfully so in this case, began to see the purpose of school as a power struggle between the teacher and the student.

If homework was a source of conflict among teacher, student, and home, it paled in comparison with other foci of Mrs. Seasoned’s attention. Whether she deliberately ignored me or had just given up on me I do not know but she chose to communicate through Eldest Son. She would say, “Tell your mother to put mittens on your brother.” “Tell your mother to put snow pants on your brother.” I did put mittens on him, $25.00 worth a week. I did put snow pants on him and he would take them off and we would go on like this until time ran out in the morning. Eventually I took a change of clothes to the school and said, “If Middle Son is too wet have him change.” I went into
Mr. Office one day with a pair of snow pants in a bag and said, “I have put them on him three times this morning. If you want him to wear snow pants, you put them on him.” Mr. Office used the opportunity to point out to me that these were not the same snow pants that the other children were wearing. The snow pants needed to be heavier and then Middle Son wouldn’t get so wet. I said that Middle Son did not find the heavier snow pants comfortable and that I would not be able to get him to wear them. I felt attacked and accused constantly. It felt like the school was not prepared to take any responsibility in this situation whatsoever. I was offended that Mrs. Seasoned and Mr. Office assumed I was so incompetent that I did not know to put mittens or snow pants on the child. I reacted to Eldest Son being the messenger. I thought it was wrong but at this stage I was so humiliated that I said nothing. The school never once showed any empathy for the challenges we faced as a family. Like everyone else they did not help. They only hurt more.

The final hurt came at the hands of Mrs. Seasoned. Eldest Son told me that she had gone through his and Middle Son’s lunches to see what they were eating. (For the record: a sandwich, a granola bar, a piece of fruit, and a diet cola. I note that caffeine is a stimulant and has a lessened but similar effect to Ritalin on A.D.D. children. Middle Son has self-medicated on diet Coke for years and still does.) I suspect she did this because Middle Son was
overweight but I was never told the reason. I was shocked and felt violated. I cried, felt shame, but said nothing.

5.4.16 A Broken Wrist

There was one final incident at this school that made me wonder. It happened in late spring. Late in the day about three o'clock, I was called by Mr. Office. He said that Eldest Son had had an accident at school and he thought perhaps his wrist was broken. I went to the school to pick him up. However, before I saw Eldest Son, Mr. Office met with me and explained what had happened. He said that Eldest Son had tripped on a raised cement step at the back of the school and had fallen directly on the step with his wrist. He had been playing tag with some other kids and that no one had pushed him. He said he was surprised that such a simple fall would cause an apparent break. He said that Mrs. Bright had been the yard duty teacher. He called her in and she told exactly the same story. Finally Eldest Son was produced with his teacher holding ice to his arm. His teacher also related exactly the same story almost word for word. I was starting to wonder what had really happened.

When Eldest Son got in the car I asked him what really happened. He said he was playing tag and he tripped over a cement step at the back of the school and fell directly on his arm. This story speaks volumes about the nature of the relationship between the school and me. I suspect they thought
I might be litigious and I heard subtle criticism from Mr. Office’s remarks about the fragility of Eldest Son’s bones. As fate would have it, that summer we moved to Newfoundland and a chance for a new beginning.

5.4.17 Uniforms

Once we knew what part of town (a community of 25,000) we would be living in I immediately got in touch by telephone with the Catholic School Board. I spoke to the Assistant Superintendent. I told her where we would be living and she told me which school the children would be going to. There was a bus stop at the end of our street. Daughter was now in grade one, Middle Son in grade three, and Eldest Son was in grade six. This was the last year they were all in the same school. I told her about the issues facing Middle Son and she seemed to be writing everything down. She said I should go to the school with the children on the first day of class at 8:35 A.M. The school was a two-storey building with a spectacular view of the bay. (Later my children would have the rare privilege of standing in their school yard watching whales, as Daughter put it, “play tag with seals” in the bay.) I climbed the stairs with three excited children in tow past a couple of dusty statues of Mary and Jesus, heading for the principal’s office. The principal introduced herself as Sister Mildred. I said I had been in touch with the Assistant Superintendent and that she told us to come to school today. Sister Mildred said she had no record from the Board office that I was coming and that she would have to fit the children into classrooms and that would not be today.
She said she wished the Board office would have told her. I wished they had too. She asked me if I had intended that the children were coming to school for the whole day, noting the lunch box Daughter was swaying in the direction of her brothers. I said, “Yes”. She said that when the children came back to school they were to be in uniform. I asked why the Assistant Superintendent hadn’t told me. She said because everybody knows that Catholic Schools in Newfoundland require the wearing of uniforms. Daughter was to be in a navy tunic with a white blouse, the boys were to be in white shirts and navy pants. Light blue shirts and blouses were permissible but discouraged on choir and picture days. On gym days they were to be in navy jogging pants instead. She told me where I could buy Daughter’s tunics. I said I had had the school records forwarded to the Board office. The next day the children returned to the school for their first day.

5.4.18 Individualized Education Plan

After the first unfortunate miscues between the Board office and the school the children were assigned classes and teachers. Eldest Son was in grade six, the highest grade in this school and was assigned a very laid-back male teacher. It suited him fine. Together I think that they were both so laid-back that neither of them did anything the entire year. Eldest Son’s life at this time and all past and future times was about socializing, not academics, and at this stage of his life, about figure skating. He made friends quickly both at school and in the skating club. (The only other male participant in the
skating club was the best man at Eldest Son's wedding in the summer of 2006.) He was happy if not academically challenged. He did experience one of the pitfalls that attends those moving from province to province each with a different school curriculum. Although Eldest Son had left Quebec bilingual in grade three he never really did take French beyond that level of difficulty again. He just kept taking the same French over and over again. The other two kids had the same experience. The French they had learned in Ontario which starts French at junior kindergarten was repeated in Newfoundland which starts French in grade one or two and then that same French was repeated again in British Columbia which starts French at an even higher grade, grade four or five. For Eldest Son in particular it must have felt like being Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*.

There was another curriculum mismatch that was more difficult for him. In Newfoundland music was an essential part of the curriculum from kindergarten. Reading music and playing an instrument was taught in the school. Eldest Son, having come from an Ontario and Quebec school system, had never seen a note of music in his life, although I think I remember he had sung in a choir in Ontario but only because he got time off school to do it. In any case he was thrown into a music class with other students who had had six years of academic musical training in a culture that valued very highly musical abilities. In Newfoundland schools there was a French teacher and also a music teacher. That is to say these subjects were taught by
specialists and not the regular classroom teacher. Mrs. Music took her work
seriously. The issue of his lack of musical training did get raised subtly by
Sister Mildred at the time of the Christmas Concert. I will write much more
about the tradition of the Christmas Concert at this school as it relates to an
experience with Middle Son. Suffice it to say at this point that the Christmas
Concert was a big deal. Eldest Son was to be in a dance number. He was to
have a red tie. The reason I had contact with the school over this matter was
because neither did I have nor could I find to purchase a red tie. My husband
had a burgundy tie and I sent it to school with Eldest Son. When he came
home he told me that the burgundy tie was not good enough. He said Sister
Mildred said it wouldn't do. If he was nothing else he was a conformist in his
own way and so it was left to me to explain to Sister Mildred that a red tie
was not available. I went to the school to discuss the tie situation and Eldest
Son's level of angst because of it with Sister Mildred. She used the
opportunity to tell me about the shame of the Ontario school system not
teaching children music. She found Eldest Son to be a klutz at learning the
dance steps. She didn't say it exactly like that but that was what I heard. I
reminded her that he was left-handed and told her I found it odd as he was
part of a pairs team in dance in figure skating. She said she knew that and
found it hard to believe. I found the conversation hard to believe and
encouraged her to go see him skate sometime. If I am not mistaken both he
and his skating partner were lefties. By some miracle they made sense of
their backward world and eventually they became the Newfoundland figure skating dance champions. Secretly I too half believed he was a klutz.

Daughter was in grade one and was assigned a very kindly, gentle, and affectionate Newfoundland woman as a teacher. Daughter was already about a foot taller than the rest of her classmates. She liked Mrs. Kindly and on the whole went happily to school. She did not particularly make friends at school though and at some point during the year, perhaps at a parent-teacher night, I was informed by Mrs. Kindly that the issue of Daughter's size was one of the reasons she had not made friends. She towered over the other children and tried to bear hug them. Mrs. Kindly said that the other children were not comfortable with it. I said I would speak to Daughter. I did not think she was particularly starved for affection at home but couldn't make sense of what I was being told. Mrs. Kindly said that even though she was not supposed to, she hugged Daughter sometimes. I was puzzled but not panicked.

But as always the real adventure was with Middle Son. We had shared freely information regarding his diagnosis from Ontario and from his previous school. The teacher he was assigned was the wife half of a husband and wife team that taught at the school (at least that is what I thought, but during the course of this telling Middle Son advised me that although they had the same surname they were actually sister-in-law and brother-in-law).
Mrs. Team was in her early sixties and therefore a very experienced teacher. I would describe her as more no-nonsense than grandmotherly but she most certainly did not have the edge of a Mrs. Seasoned. By mid-October I was called to the school to meet with Mrs. Team and Sister Mildred to discuss Middle Son’s progress, make that performance, to date. Again I made the journey up the stairs past the dusty Madonna to Sister Mildred’s office. There I was greeted by Sister Mildred, Mrs. Team, and a heavy set blonde woman the name of whom I did not know. Sister Mildred introduced the stranger as the Special Education teacher. Mrs. Team indicated that although Middle Son was not particularly engaged in the classroom activities he was not particularly “trouble” either. He was in Newfoundland vernacular “a bit of a hard case”. He was reading at least at grade level or beyond, he knew more French than the rest of the class, and he was interested in social studies. The real problem, she allowed, was mathematics. She would begin the mathematics lesson and he would completely disengage. She was sure he hadn’t a clue. Sometimes he would take out his Game Boy and play it. She had let this go on because he was so uninvolved in the mathematics lesson that it kept his attention and he did not, therefore, disturb others. She had sent him to be assessed by Mrs. Specialed and the diagnosis was that he had very little mathematical skill beyond the numbers themselves and basic addition and subtraction. Together the team, I assumed the three I was meeting with, thought it was best if Middle Son was given an Individualized
Education Plan (IEP) and he would go out of the classroom and spend the 40 minutes of mathematics class with Mrs. Specialed and she would teach him mathematics one on one. At the time I never considered if this was the right thing or not. I never considered what or even knew what an IEP was. Nor was it explained to me beyond what I have just said. I never considered the harm that might be done to the child by singling him out and sending him to Mrs. Specialed. By this stage of the game I was too overwhelmed by the experts. I wanted to be seen as cooperative. I was no longer full of shame and hurt as I had been before. I was far too defeated for that. Basically I thought “Whatever”. “Do what you want”. I simply signed the paper before I left Sister Mildred’s office and it was done.

5.4.19 Mrs. Specialed

I had not noticed anything exceptional or different about Mrs. Specialed upon first meeting her. I did check around with my staff colleagues at my place of employment and was told by a prominent Catholic amongst the group that the reason that Mrs. Specialed was the special education teacher was because she was a lousy teacher. When she had been in a classroom the kids did not advance enough and so now she was relegated to those for whom advancement did not matter. I pursued the matter no further. The fact of the matter is that over the course of his school career Middle Son was thrown a total of five life lines. Mrs. Specialed was the first of those life lines. He was in grade three now and for the first time he and we came into
contact with a teacher who really and truly cared about him. As we had as parents, she accepted him as he was. She saw him as a person, not a problem. I don't know how much math she taught him although he still remembers to this day that she taught him BEDMAS\(^{23}\), but she taught him life. She became his confidant and guardian angel. He talked to her about being teased and she taught him how to cope. She taught him how to accept himself as a person, warts and all. She tried to make him realize that the motivations of others, Sister Mildred for example, were not just about hurting him but that there were reasons behind their actions. Life, she told him, was not a power struggle with him at the centre of it. Since he was an advanced reader she encouraged him to read beyond classroom books and Readers: Dickens, Twain, Tolkien, C.S Lewis, and others.

I do not know for certain but I expect that she intervened many times on his behalf particularly with Sister Mildred. He was supposed to be wearing proper slacks and shirts as a school uniform. He was uncomfortable in those clothes but could manage the white tee shirt and navy jogging pants that were allowed to be worn on gym days.\(^{24}\) I heard only occasionally from the uniform police, I suspect it was Mrs. Specialed that kept them at bay.

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\(^{23}\) The order in which mathematical operations are performed: brackets, exponents, division, multiplication, addition and subtraction.

\(^{24}\) Gym strip is a B.C. notion. Newfoundlanders, Catholic Newfoundlanders at least, are far too modest to have their children stripping in front of others.
I have thought often about her qualities. What was it about her that made her so special? She was a native Newfoundlander, she was married with children of her own, and she was heavyset herself. Perhaps these all played into it. I don’t know. She was compassion, empathy, humour, but also no bullshit, and no self pity allowed either. For the four years he was at this school she made school for him.

5.4.20 Belfast Revisited

As much as I was generally in favour of the wearing of uniforms there was one occasion in which it was not particularly helpful. That occasion was every morning at the end of the street that was named after a governor general where the children waited for the bus. Unlike Ontario where all the students that went to any school were bussed on the same bus, in Newfoundland the Protestants went on one bus and the Catholics went on another. There was, however, a common bus stop. With the Catholic children in uniform and the “heathens” not, it was easy to tell who was who and thus the irrationality of the streets of Belfast was transported to Governor General Drive every morning as taunts were hurled and stones and snowballs thrown. It was amazing to me, especially given the previous experience in Ontario with an added complexity of language and everyone on the same bus, yet there was never an incident of taunting. Here the mere facts of difference (uniforms and bus) created a whole other dynamic. It got to the point where I became concerned about the kids waiting for the bus in the mornings and
when I could I drove them to school. The same scenario did not play out in
the evening as the busses dropped students at different times, but the
morning ritual was strange to say the least.

On one occasion Daughter who was in either grade one or two at
the time was hit on the head with an ice ball. As I had in Quebec, I attended
the other school and reported the incident. Both the principal of the Catholic
and Public school had conversations with students about appropriate bus
stop behaviour but they were to no avail. Just like in the real world accords
did not hold, peace was temporary. My children eventually figured out that
the best thing to do was to go to the bus stop as late as possible and you
would miss the “marching season” and incidentally frequently the bus. My
children were not participants in the ”Governor General Drive Wars” as I
called them, although Middle Son did get sucked in on one occasion in
defence of a friend. He did have a very close friend who went to the same
school as the “heathens” and so I think he really could not see the irrational
differences that were the fundamental bases of the wars. Odd. Strange.
Peculiar. Why?

5.4.21 Cultures Within Cultures

In the second year we lived in Newfoundland Eldest Son, in grade
seven, went to the Catholic junior high. The junior high was located next to
the Catholic high school which in turn was located next to the mall. It was
the tradition that kids went to the mall for lunch. Who thought of this arrangement? But to their credit the food retailers in the mall catered to the need. You could get a slice of pizza, a salad, and a pop for five bucks. The junior high housed grades seven, eight, and nine. I should think from a teacher's perspective not for the faint of heart.

Daughter was now in grade two and Middle Son was in grade four. In September the teachers they were assigned were two women from the Philippines. I think they might have been related perhaps sister-in-laws but I can't remember. Whether it was me accepting of stereotypes or whether it was true, both Daughter and Middle Son reported on the strictness of their teachers. They also reported on the clarity of the view they were given in religion class. After the strike which I will report on momentarily, Middle Son's teacher retired. As part of the settlement the government offered some sort of enhanced early retirement buyout; to my amazement this was discussed in the classroom as if it was some sort of negative. I was surprised, but on this occasion held my tongue. Middle Son did not particularly complain about the tight rein held in the classroom, I suspect his days were still built around Mrs. Specialed. Daughter was not happy with her classroom and was horrified one day when the teacher marked her absent when she had been present. It made her feel invisible and that she didn't matter.
Although I have told about the strictness of this year at school as reported by the children, I had cause later to doubt it a little or maybe a lot. For reasons that no sophisticated urban dweller will understand, one of our favourite restaurants in this community was A&W. We would go almost every Saturday morning. On any given Saturday morning there were exactly the same 20 or so people that had been there the Saturday morning before. Once she had retired, Middle Son’s former teacher Mrs. Buyout and her husband were amongst the crowd of A&W regulars. Whenever she saw both Middle Son and Daughter she always inquired how they were doing and she was both witty and affectionate with them. I wondered what I had missed when Mrs. Buyout had been in the classroom.

5.4.22 On Strike

During our second year at this school we, along with the rest of Newfoundland, endured a six week long teachers strike. The fact that there would be a strike built up over a period of time. To my horror teachers discussed the merits of the strike in the classroom prior to the actual strike. My children, who had only ever seen a strike through the eyes of management, and in small Northern mining communities came home terrified. To make matters worse my husband was still working for Royal
Oak Mines and had been when the Giant Yellowknife murders occurred. One of those murdered was an acquaintance of ours. Suffice it to say the issues of the behaviour of those on strike had been discussed openly in our house and from a particular perspective. When their teachers discussed in classrooms that they were going to “stick it to the government” my children thought that they might be targets of the union’s wrath. I remember one of them saying, “Mom, do you think our tires will get slashed this time?” I called Sister Mildred. She did not seem to understand my point. I may be mistaken but I am pretty sure that in Newfoundland the principals are also members of the teachers union or at least beneficiaries of “Me too” clauses. And so I empowered my children. I said to them that any time a teacher discusses teachers’ union politics in the classroom you should raise your hand and say that that topic of conversation is not an appropriate one for the classroom. There was no lack of opportunity over the subsequent years for them to use this particular empowerment. They all three did and each of them on more than one occasion. Teachers should remember that they have in their classes children like my children who may see things from a very different perspective.

On September 18, 1992, at the height of a labour dispute, an explosion in the mine, 750 ft (230 m) underground, killed nine workers (some were replacement workers and some were union members who had crossed the picket line) riding in a man-car. Striking worker Roger Warren was later convicted of placing the bomb. For further information on this event, refer to Selleck and Thompson (1997) and/or Staples and Owen (1995).
What Lessons Can be Learned from A Christmas Concert?

I had been rushing the entire day. It had been a day of almost missing and getting there late. I had been up at 4 A.M. and driven the sixty kilometres to the airport. I had spent the day in St. John's in preparation meetings for collective bargaining. The meetings had ended shortly after noon and I had taken the opportunity to dash over to the Avalon Mall in hopes of finding some of the supplies that were deemed to be critical for the school Christmas concert that were not available in the local community. The items required were a red tie, a white polo shirt with a collar, and a pair of black shoes that were sneakers (so they would meet Middle Son's approval) that looked enough like oxfords (so that they would meet Sister Mildred's approval). At Wal-Mart I had struck pay dirt on all three items. The flight left St. John's at 3 P.M. Although it had snowed most of the way, I was back in town shortly after five. I grabbed a pizza, got the kids dressed, and had Middle Son at the Arts and Culture Centre for 6:30 P.M. But it had not gone as easily as it could have.

Middle Son, nine years old and in grade four, indicated he didn't like the shirt. It was too itchy. Perhaps it was, I had thought to myself, because it was new and full of sizing but he had refused to wear the white cotton dress shirt that had been actually required. The best I could do was getting him a white polo shirt that was of a type of material similar to the tee shirts he was accustomed too. It took me 20 minutes of negotiating to get him
to put on the new white shirt. Despite my warning that he would be too hot, he finally put the new shirt on top of a tee shirt. The shoes were a different story. He could not understand why black shoes had to be worn when no one could see your feet. "Why couldn't you just wear the shoes you always wore?"

There was no answer. I let him wear his regular shoes and take the new shoes. Someone else would have to conduct the shoe negotiation. There was one more snag: I hadn't a clue how to tie a tie. I phoned my friend Paul. Yes, I could drop by his house, send Middle Son in, and he would tie the tie for him. Paul had come out to the car with him and commented, "Many a teaching career was made or broken tonight."

We arrived at the Arts and Culture Centre on time. Middle Son had disappeared back stage and we (Eldest Son, Daughter, and me) sat in the audience seats. The Centre seated about 600 hundred and I had looked around and noted that almost every seat was taken. The senior Christmas Concert attracted a few less members of Newfoundland extended families than the junior concert, kindergarten to grade three, had the night before. I had no such extended family to be bothered with. There was just me, Daughter in grade two (who had been part of the frenzy the night before), and Eldest Son in grade seven (a reluctant attendee).

As I sat there I remember contemplating Paul's remark. What was the purpose of a Christmas concert? What did the children get out of it? I
convinced myself that the children prepared for the concert, then proudly showed off the results of that preparation to their parents, and I was sure there was value in that. Preparation. Results. Applause. Pride in your accomplishment. If that were the case then it had been worth the mad dash through the Avalon Mall, the negotiation around the shirt and the shoes, and the heartburn from the pizza.

The concert began. A welcome from the principal, Sister Mildred. A recitation from one of the Grocer's children. Then the grade four choir. There he was. Red tie. White shirt. Couldn't tell if he was wearing the black shoes or not. It came his turn to step up to the next level on the riser. He stumbled a little. He eventually got up. His face was very red. He was clearly very hot. He dug and scratched a little, the way a nine year old boy wearing an itchy shirt would. Mrs. Music conducted the choir. He was not looking at her. He was looking around. Most of the children were looking right at her. The singing began. He sang. He appeared to know the words. He continued scratching and looking around. They sang four songs. They left. He had trouble again getting down from the riser. He was gone. The concert continued. There was a somewhat long mini-play as part of the concert starring a grade six student, the provincial court judge's daughter. She enunciated her words and sang, to be fair to her, quite well. Finally the all grades choir, grade four, five, and six together came out. I looked for him
amongst the white blouses with red skirts with white garland stapled to the hem and the white shirts, navy pants, and red ties but I could not find him.

After the first four songs sung by the grade four choir, Middle Son apparently returned to the downstairs, in the basement of the Arts and Culture Centre in a dressing room. His tie was too tight around his neck (he had told Paul it was too tight but no one ever listened to him). He was too hot. Why did he have to wear the damn stupid shirt anyway? It was too itchy. At the very least he was taking the damn black shoes off. He was sure no one could see your feet anyway. He took the shoes off. He sat down on a bench in the dressing room. His friend Lydia warned him, "Middle Son, don't take your shoes off, Sister Mildred and Mrs. Music will be mad." He didn't care. Let those two bitches be mad. He was not going to wear a stupid tie, a stupid shirt, and a stupid pair of black shoes for another whole hour before they went on again for the all grades choir. Fuck them. Sister Mildred saw him with his shoes off. She told him to put them back on. He told her he would when it was time to go on again. She told him that she was not pleased with him, that he had not paid attention to Mrs. Music when they were on stage, and that he must stand still. He said he sang and that he knew the words. She said he should put his shoes on. Lydia said she would help him with the shoes. Then Mrs. Music came in the room. She was mad too about the not standing still, about the tripping on the riser, and about the damn shoes. Sister Mildred and Mrs. Music whispered to each other in the corner. Then
they came to him and said that they felt he really wasn’t that interested in
the concert anyway, that he had not stood still, that he had taken his shoes
off, and that he was not to go on with the all grades choir. Lydia pleaded his
case. She would help him with the shoes. They said it was too late. He was
not to go on. He said he wanted to leave then. He wanted to find his mom in
the audience so he could go home. Sister Mildred said no. He would be
disruptive looking for his mom in the audience. He would just have to stay in
the dressing room and he would be dismissed with the other children after
the concert. The other children lined up for the all grades choir. Mrs.
Specialed was sent in to sit with him, but he could not speak even to her. He
was very mad. He paced the room looking for some way to blow it up and
wreck the concert for those two bitches. If only he had the power of the White
Power Ranger he would do something to those two. He was really mad this
time. He would get those two and he would not be sorry ever. He faced the
humiliation of the other children returning and, except for Lydia, asking why
he hadn’t gone out the second time. Finally it was over.

He found me in the lobby. I asked him why he had not come out
with the all grades choir. He said that Sister Mildred and Mrs. Music
wouldn’t let him, that they were bitches, and that he was going to get them
for this, and that he was really mad. When we got in the car he started to cry.
He cried himself to sleep, all the while plotting if only he were a Power
Ranger, how he would get those two. I noticed too that he had not brought
home the black shoes. I promised him I would call Sister Mildred in the morning and try to find out why he hadn't been allowed to sing the second time.

My conversation with Sister Mildred the next morning went something like this: "Hello this is Middle Son's mother. I was wondering if you could tell me why Middle Son wasn't allowed to come out with the all grades choir last night. He was very upset and cried most of the night. He does not know why he wasn't allowed to come out. I did notice in the grade four choir that he was looking around and had trouble getting up and down the riser but he appeared to know the words to the songs and seemed quite happy out there. One thing that you have to realize is that his heart is broken. The Christmas Concert is for all the kids including Middle Son not just for kids like Judge's Daughter. If you wanted Middle Son not to be part of the concert because he couldn't stand still then you shouldn't have let him rehearse for the last month. It is not fair to him that you decided he couldn't participate last night. You owe Middle Son an explanation as to why he wasn't allowed to participate. I will not drop this until Middle Son has an explanation. Further, Middle Son left a new pair of black shoes at the Arts and Culture Centre last night, I wonder if you could have a look for them."
Sister Mildred and Mrs. Music called Middle Son down to the principal’s office. They said that they understood from his mother that he was upset about not going on with the all grades choir. They said that they had decided that he should not go on because they thought he wasn’t interested in the concert and that they thought that it was too hard on him going up and down the riser. He said he knew the words to the songs; his mother, brother, and sister were in the audience and he had wanted to be part of it. They said they were sorry and they asked him to forgive them. He said no; he would not forgive them. Sister Mildred reminded him that one of the lessons that Jesus Christ had taught his followers was forgiveness. They kept insisting on this forgiveness shit. He thought Mrs. Music looked like she was going to cry. If they wanted forgiveness, he would give it. It would get him out of here. He said he forgave them, but he did not mean it.

Although no one ever told him, Middle Son knew in his heart of hearts that the apology from Sister Mildred and Mrs. Music was not sincere. He knew that it had only been offered because I was friends with the School Board Chair and because the School Superintendent was his scout master. He learned from the Christmas concert that it pays to have friends in high places, that singing in a choir is an unpleasant experience, that you can hide a pair of shoes in the ceiling tiles of the Arts and Culture Centre and no one will ever find them, and that he would never forgive anyone ever again.
5.4.25 Parent-Teacher Nightmares Continue

I do not remember the exact circumstances under which the next event took place. I don't remember if it was around the time of the Christmas Concert or if it was around the time that Middle Son had been assigned the IEP or if it was around another event relating to Middle Son that I have not reported on. In any case it followed hard upon some event that had involved Middle Son. I was called by Sister Mildred on the telephone. She wanted to discuss the academic progress of Daughter. I said sure I would come to the school. This is where I am not able to remember exactly the circumstances. It may have been the year that Daughter was in grade four. Mr. Laidback was her teacher. I remember that I had gone to the Parent-Teachers Night and that he had shown me the untidy state of Daughter's desk as compared to the other children's. He showed me too her inabilities to print or write neatly like the other children. He was not someone that had a high degree of angst around it and all the showing of the inadequacy of Daughter was done in quite a nonchalant fashion. (Perhaps it is an aside and perhaps it is not but he himself had a brother who was brain injured in some way. Again I don't remember all the circumstances but the brother had been hired in one of the units that reported to me at my place of employment on some kind of job training programme.) It was around this time that Sister Mildred wanted to talk to me. I went to her office. She started to make the suggestion that Daughter too should perhaps be given an IEP. I had just come off some sort of dealing with Middle Son again and I reacted to the suggestion. I said no.
They should try harder with Daughter. I did not give my permission for anything. I think I was crying. Finally Sister Mildred said that maybe the best thing for the meantime was to just leave us alone.

Did I deprive Daughter of help that she needed because of pride? Eventually she was given an IEP. On the other hand perhaps instead of giving up on her they should have tried harder to understand what was going on. She was and is intelligent, maybe even exceptional but she finds the physical act of printing and writing difficult. Teachers criticized her for that and so she gave up. She simply could not do what they wanted. Would all of this have been revealed earlier if I hadn’t said no at this point? To be honest I am doubtful.

5.4.26 Janis Ian

Do you remember the Janis Ian song Seventeen that has a line in it “those whose names were never called when choosing sides in basketball”? Daughter lived this humiliation at this school and later at another school as well. Interestingly enough, and I have no reason for stating this other than it is a fact, on both occasions the teachers involved in subjecting her to this humiliation were women of colour. On this occasion it was in a physical education class. The sport was not basketball but something else, Daughter can’t remember what. In any case the teacher assigned two popular girls to pick sides. Daughter who was in grade four was never chosen. She was by
default assigned to one team. By this time she was crying. The teacher made her play the game anyway and said nothing to her. She came home and told me about it. I was outraged and felt empathy for her. However, I was probably traveling or too busy or something and I did not contact the school. The next physical education class the teacher had the students choose sides again. This time though Daughter and the student who was chosen second last were doing the choosing. Daughter chose carefully selecting only students for whom being selected would be reparations. Again the teacher said nothing.

5.4.27 On the Richter Scale

By now Eldest Son was in grade ten in his first year of high school (located even closer to the mall than the junior high had been), Middle Son was in grade seven at the junior high, and Daughter remained at the elementary school that overlooked the bay. It was our fifth year in Newfoundland. My husband continued to work at the mine which was a fly-in operation and was gone from Monday morning at 5 A.M. until Thursday evening at about 7 P.M. Because he was away he did not get involved in the kids’ school activities. Intervention and advocacy was left mostly to me. But not on this occasion. This incident happened on a Thursday in October and it was the one and only time that my husband intervened with the school. Middle Son had come home on Thursday and at dinner time asked us what the Richter Scale was. My husband who is a geologist was delighted with the
question because it was in his field. He explained what it was. Then Middle Son told us why he was asking. He said that the Physical Education teacher had said it and he (Middle Son) didn’t know what it was. He said that in phys. ed class the teacher and a group of boys were sitting cross-legged on the floor and Middle Son was heading towards them and he stumbled at the last minute and fell to the floor sort of half flopping down. The teacher said, “That’s a 6.0 on the Richter Scale.” Middle Son said the kids all laughed but he didn’t because he didn’t know what the comment meant. Nor did we explain it to him. Whether he did not associate the scientific explanation we gave him at dinner or whether he too was tired of always being enraged I do not know. He didn’t mention it again in any case. But my husband was outraged. He said we must do something because the teacher’s comment and behaviour were unacceptable. I said he should call the principal. I knew her a little because she had completed her Master’s degree the year before and she had worked at my place of employment when she was working on her Master’s degree. Her advisor was a good friend of ours.

In any case the next morning he called the principal. He told her what had happened and he insisted on meeting with the physical education teacher. She arranged for this for the afternoon. Although he never wore a suit and tie to work (at the mine red flannel shirts and blue jeans were more dressed up than you needed to be), he put on a suit and tie. He went to the school and he met with both the principal and the teacher. He said to the
teacher, “I do not do this for Middle Son. I do this for the next child. Middle Son is valued at home. We are all proud of what we look like and who we are in our house. Besides he didn’t understand the remark that was made yesterday so in some way there is no harm done. However, as a teacher you should be held at least to the standard that I am held to at the mine as a supervisor of men. I can tell you that if I made a remark to a man at the mine the same as you made to Middle Son yesterday I would be fired and I would deserve to be. I know that nothing will happen to you but what you said is not acceptable in the working world although it is apparently acceptable in the teaching world. If I had my way you would be held to the same standard that I am held to at the mine. I just wanted you to know that.” The physical education teacher attempted to apologize. My husband said that he neither deserved an apology nor was he prepared to forgive. He just left. We never told Middle Son of this intervention until years later.

5.4.28 Mrs. Masters

The principal of the junior high, Mrs. Masters, was Middle Son’s second life line. Whether it was because she knew me from the previous year or whether it was her way she took an interest in Middle Son. Without her he would probably have had a much more difficult year. Although Mrs. Specialed had been his salvation in elementary school the special education teacher he was assigned at the junior high was anything but. She just didn’t get him. He was taken out of French and music classes and was sent to the
special education teacher for instruction in mathematics and writing. She was demanding and she didn’t talk to him at all. He hated going. He began referring to her by the name that is an accurate description of a female dog. Junior high was hard enough and Mrs. Sheppard-Collie did not make it any easier. She was prissy. He was untidy. She demanded but did not earn respect. He was disrespectful. He was miserable and touchy.

But Mrs. Masters threw him a life line. She talked to him in the halls. She noticed that he was going over to the mall for lunch and thought that he needed to be more cognizant of not spilling food on his jacket and gently and kindly she told him about it. She thought that being tidier would help his peer interactions and help him fit into junior high better. She always talked to him whenever she saw him and he began to think of her as a colleague not an enemy. He was mostly angry in these times and a kid one day bounced a Skittle off his stomach. He was enraged by the teasing. He reacted by grabbing the kid and pinning him against a locker. Mrs. Masters diffused the situation and he came home feeling that she had supported him and that she had heard that he did not like to be teased. He had a sense that although he had been in the wrong too that justice had been fairly administered. Finally, whether it was because she knew we were moving or because he had expressed angst to her, she exempted him from the grade seven mandatory assessment examinations. He simply stayed home that day.
Of all the things that Mrs. Masters was good at the thing I think she was the best at was negotiating: she negotiated his anger, she negotiated the system for him, and for herself. She got it and she got him.

5.4.29 The Last Parent-Teacher Nightmare

It was the year that Eldest Son was in grade 10. Middle Son was in grade seven and Daughter was in grade five. It was late autumn. It was a parent-teacher night for Eldest Son at the high school. Each parent was given a schedule and you were to go from room to room, just as the student did to attend classes, visiting with each of his teachers. There were a few chairs outside each classroom door and the parents lined up either sitting on the chairs or standing in the hall. Each parent was to be given five minutes but there was no regulation of the time taken by any particular parent and some line ups were an hour or more long. I remembered that when my brother had been in high school the mother of the best student in the class was appointed secretary and she would stand outside the door with a watch and keep the teacher on schedule. When my youngest brother was in high school my mother, who was marginally literate herself, always had the honour of being the secretary. I began to appreciate the merits of that system on this particular evening, waiting, waiting, and waiting. The wait was simply not worth it. Eldest Son, whom each and every teacher allowed was a bright child, was doing absolutely nothing in school. He was getting by with B’s and C’s but each and every teacher told me he was doing nothing but coasting.
When I got to the French teacher I was completely demoralized. A once fluently bilingual child was doing nothing and was just scraping by in French too. The last straw came when I ran into my husband’s boss’s wife. She said she didn’t know what she was doing here. Her son had all A’s. I didn’t know what I was doing here either and vowed that I would never go to another parent-teacher night as long as I lived and I didn’t. It was just too depressing. Eldest Son had incredible potential but it was being squandered by him and by a school system that couldn’t get his attention.

5.4.30 What’s Wrong with this Picture?

In grade four Daughter had Mr. Laidback and in grade five she had Mr. Team. At the time, in Newfoundland schools, there was a mandatory basic skills assessment test given in grade four towards the end of the year and the results were reported to the parents at the beginning of the next school year. Although I had not given permission for Daughter to be assigned an IEP, she had been assigned to the school counsellor. I was not and am not clear on what the role of the school counsellor was but Daughter had gone to her occasionally. The school counsellor was the aunt of one of the students in Daughter’s class and the sister-in-law of one of my staff members; she seemed to be related to everyone. Daughter seemed not to mind Mrs. Related and I hadn’t thought at the time that I should intervene regarding the fact that she had been assigned to her. I had been scheduled to see Mrs. Related as well as the classroom teachers when I was still going to parent and teacher
nights and she seemed like an okay person although as I mentioned I was unsure of her role. In any case since Daughter had difficulty with the physical act of printing/writing she was given an accommodation for the provincial assessments. For the vocabulary and reading comprehension parts Mrs. Related scribed the answers for her. Mrs. Related was amazed at how far Daughter got on the vocabulary section. She was easily able to answer well until she got to an advanced section that had complex scientific terms. Likewise the reading comprehension section was scribed by Mrs. Related and Daughter excelled on it as well. There was a written section that she was required to write herself. She had to write a précis of a short article and also write a paragraph on a specific topic. She was given no accommodation for the written part of the test although it was well known that this was truly her disability and not reading comprehension at all. It seems odd to me that she was accommodated when she didn’t need it and not when she did. But at the time I said nothing. The next year, at the beginning of grade five, the test results were shared with me. For whatever reason, perhaps because it crossed two school years, it was Mrs. Related who shared the results with me and not the classroom teacher. Mrs. Related told me that the school was very concerned about Daughter’s results. The tests showed that Daughter was reading and comprehending at a grade twelve level and was writing at a kindergarten level. Mrs. Related seemed to be looking to me for the solution to this contradictory puzzle. “How can that be?” she said. She seemed to be
blaming Daughter, perhaps I did too. She just won’t write properly. What’s wrong with her? What’s wrong with this picture? The topic was never discussed again and Daughter was given no other intervention as a result of the puzzling test results. It was at this moment that she slipped through the cracks. It was also our last year in Newfoundland. The mine was closing and we were being transferred to British Columbia.

**5.4.31 Mr. Hockey**

Of all the moves the thought of this one was hardest on Eldest Son. He was going into grade eleven and he had both a girl friend and a skating partner. He and his skating partner had been together for five years. They had become the Newfoundland champions and the next year Newfoundland would host the Canada Winter Games. But it was not to be. Middle Son and Daughter were both ambivalent about the move. All knew that moving was inevitable.

We moved into the nicest house we ever lived in in our new community in British Columbia’s Northern Interior. With a population 85,000, the city was also the largest place we had ever lived. The neighbourhood we chose was middle-class. For the first time in their entire lives the kids would have the opportunity if they chose it to walk to school. We let Daughter, who was going into grade six, choose which school she wanted to go to: either the Catholic elementary school, or the neighbourhood
public school. She chose walking to school and going home for lunch over uniforms, bussing, and Catholicism. As luck would have it the Catholic high school was in our neighbourhood and Eldest Son who had been educated his entire school career up to this point in Catholic schools chose to continue Catholic education. I will speak more of the Catholic high school in this community later but suffice it to say that this was absolutely the right choice. This school had more sense of community and provided a greater sense of belonging than any other school we had previously or subsequently encountered on our cross-country journey. Even though he was only there for grade eleven and twelve Eldest Son to this day has lifelong friends from that school. The school has since closed, and he is now three years beyond graduating from university but he has any number of professional and personal relationships that began at that school.

Right or wrong we left less choice to Middle Son. He was going into grade eight. We had learned from experience that everything was just plain better for everyone if the kids were not in the same school, and four years of Sister Mildred had caused him at this moment to reconsider the option of public schools. There was a neighbourhood public high school that accommodated grade eight but he had only been to a junior high in Newfoundland and I could not for the life of me understand how he would ever be mature enough for high school and so we sought another option. There were a couple of junior secondary schools in the city centre that housed
grade eight, nine, and ten and then fed a very large city centre high school. It was not that far away and I could drive him most mornings. I was hoping at the time he would be able to take city transit home, but that was not to be either. Eventually I got a charge account at the taxi and he took a cab home, or I picked him up. Eldest Son got his license and he picked him up. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. And I continue to believe for grade eight it was the right thing. However, I did not appreciate fully the difference between schools that are fed from a downtown location versus ones that are fed from the suburbs.

I visited the school the week before classes started and explained to the Vice Principal, who shared a surname with a close mining friend of ours, that I wished to send Middle Son to a junior high school rather than a full fledged high school because I was concerned about his maturity level. I explained too about his A.D.D. and his issues at school. Mr. Shared told me that I was welcome to send Middle Son to this school but that transportation would be my responsibility and he even thought that he had the best placement for him in a programme called Transitions Eight. He said the programme was for kids just like Middle Son who needed an extra year to transition into high school. Instead of the rotary class scheduling the Transition Eight students had the same teacher for all academic subjects but participated with all other students in classes such as shop or physical education. Mr. Shared said the class size was quite small, about twelve to
fourteen. He said it was mostly boys but there were some girls. I asked him if Transitions Eight was another name for a dumping ground for behavioural problems. He said no and that I should meet the Transitions Eight teacher and see what I thought. He took me to the Transitions Eight classroom. He introduced me to the teacher. He was a very young-looking man wearing a short sleeved white shirt who had the same name as a famous hockey player. He said he traded on the name sometimes with the kids since they thought it was cool his name was famous. I talked to Mr. Hockey for probably an hour about the school challenges of Middle Son. He seemed enthusiastic, authentic, and very caring, and I could also tell that Middle Son would really like him. So it was Middle Son was registered in a downtown junior secondary school in Transitions Eight.

I was right about Mr. Hockey. He was life line number three. After about three weeks I had a conversation with Mr. Hockey about Middle Son’s progress. Mr. Hockey said Middle Son is so polite. “He calls me ‘Sir’”, he said. (I didn’t want to shatter the illusion and tell him that it was five years of training by nuns and habit, not a sign of politeness at all.) He said that he gave the class a general interest evaluation test and Middle Son scored the highest at 78%. The test was comprised of things like basic Canadian geography, history, and identification of some literary works. Mr. Hockey was impressed. He was aware that Middle Son was not very advanced though in either Mathematics or Science but since the mode of the class was that the
students worked at their own pace he felt he would manage. I asked him if
Middle Son was making friends. He said no but that Middle Son did quite
often stay after school and talk to him about any number of topics from
technology to politics and so he felt he was connecting.

Not much changed from those first three weeks throughout the rest
of the year. Middle Son adored Mr. Hockey but he did not make friends. The
school's population was tougher and rougher than Middle Son was used to
and I think there was a fair bit of teasing that went on. I did raise a few
issues around teasing with Mr. Shared or Mr. Hockey and they seemed to
deal with it as best they could but I sensed Middle Son was not happy. He
began to take what he and I called “discretionary days”. I would let him take
a day off whenever he needed one. I tried to limit it to one per month but
sometimes it was as frequent as once a week. There were days when he could
just not face going to school and so, right or wrong, I let him stay at home.

By the time grade nine came around I was uncertain what to do but
I rationalized to myself that had we stayed in Newfoundland he wouldn’t
have gone to a regular high school until grade ten and so I thought we would
stick with this arrangement one more year even though in grade nine he
would be in the general school population, with no Mr. Hockey as sanctuary.
In grade nine he was absolutely miserable. The number of discretionary days
increased dramatically although I was wrong about one thing. Mr. Hockey
continued to be his one meaningful contact. Still every day after school he went to Mr. Hockey’s room and they talked about whatever, computer games, feeding chickens (Mr. Hockey’s), and anything else. Middle Son’s spirit was fragile if not broken. I am certain but for Mr. Hockey he wouldn’t have made it to grade ten.

**5.4.32 The Hyphenated Canadian Connection**

For Middle Son there were two themes that dominated the two years he spent at the junior secondary school in British Columbia: teasing and anger. Both spiralled out of control. Eventually they became rage. I could think of others too, isolation being one but for Mr. Hockey. He did not communicate much of this at home. I only suspected it because I could see how unhappy he was and because of the ever increasing number of discretionary days that were required. I approached Mr. Hockey, Mr. Shared and, even occasionally the principal. I believe they did what they could but they did not have control of hallway or before school or after school interactions. Middle Son was not particularly one to “tell” on others. He had long ago learned that he rarely was able to cultivate empathy with authority figures. He endured and got angrier and angrier.

If academically Mr. Hockey had held grade eight together, grade nine was a write-off. The two most difficult subjects for him were not academic subjects at all but were shop and physical education. In both cases,
and again I tell this for no other reason other than it is a fact, the teachers were hyphenated Canadians. The shop teacher was Indo-Canadian and the physical education teacher was Chinese-Canadian. Cultural diversity in this school was more present in the staff than it was in the students. Although there were a number of first or second generation Canadians, the school was mostly Caucasian and ten per cent First Nations.

In any case the worst “in class” teasing from others happened in shop class and in physical education class. It was pretty unsubtle taunting, “fatso”, “piggy-boy” and a new one that Middle Son considered untrue, despite his slight accent and identifying vernacular, “Newfie”. The fact of the matter is both the shop teacher and the physical education teacher refused to stop the teasing. They both recognized the anger in Middle Son and they talked to him instead of his tormenters. They told him that he just had to get used to teasing. They said that he shouldn’t get angry at it. They said he had to control his anger and just take the teasing. The gym teacher said, and the conversation was more or less repeated by the shop teacher, “If I got angry at everyone who called me a Chink, I would constantly be angry. You can’t be that angry all the time so you just have to accept it and go on.” I am sure there was sincerity in his attempt to help Middle Son, but it did not help. Anger and isolation continued and built.
The shop teacher actually made things worse as he sincerely went about doing his job. When the students advanced to using power saws the shop teacher, who had observed Middle Son’s Attention Deficit Disorder and some of the impulsiveness that went with it, became concerned for safety. He assigned Middle Son an aide in shop class. This added more fuel to the teasing fire. “Retard” was the latest log. The aide was also ethnically an Indo-Canadian. Middle Son resented him and there was no peace. I talked to Middle Son about treating people respectfully but at first at least my advice went unheeded. The shop class assignment was to build a table that you could set a T.V. on. Somewhere in this project Middle Son made peace with the aide and together they built the table. Although I had just recently bought such a table for our family room, it was immediately replaced with the one that Middle Son and, I suspect, mostly the aide had built. We still have it in the family room to this day. Middle Son asked me to buy a thank you card for the aide and I did.

5.3.33 The Stool and Disneyland

In late October in grade nine in shop class anger boiled over and turned to rage. Middle Son was a prolific doodler and was always drawing something. The shop class was organized with students in pairs sitting on stools with drafting tables. At the beginning of the class Middle Son’s partner leaned over to him and said, “Why don’t you draw a cookie then eat it?” To be honest it was more subtle teasing than was the norm in the school. Middle
Son spent the whole 40 minutes of the shop class deciding what to do about this latest insult. As soon as the class ended he stood up picked up his stool and crashed it in the direction of his seat mate. The seat mate wasn’t even sure why he was being attacked but fought back. Mr. Hyphen yelled at Middle Son to stop and broke the fight up immediately. The seat mate had a couple of marks on his shoulders but there was not serious injury. The principal who shared a surname with a cartoon character called me. Dr. Character told me what had happened. He more or less told me the story that I have related above. He told me I should come pick Middle Son up as he had been given a four day suspension.

When I got to the school Middle Son was in the company of the Vice Principal, Mr. Shared. Middle Son was white as a sheet and had clearly been crying. Both Dr. Character and Mr. Shared told me that they were aware of the teasing that had been going on. They admitted that Middle Son had “snapped” because of it. They talked to him and to me about not solving things with violence, but they did not particularly give either of us much confidence that they would be able to deal with the tormenting of Middle Son. They did tell him that his actions could have resulted in criminal charges. The seat mate was suspended for the same length of time. We went home. I didn’t say much more to Middle Son than what Dr. Character and Mr. Shared had said.
I had planned on taking Middle Son out of school for those four days anyway as I was attending a conference in Anaheim. I had arranged to take the whole family with me. They were going to go to Disneyland. And so it was that Middle Son spent the four days of his suspension in Disneyland.

The first thing I thought of as a result of the suspension was the shame. I thought of my father who had already been dead some seventeen years by this time and what shame he would have felt at the suspension and I felt that shame myself. No one in our whole family had ever been suspended before and I felt a sense of personal shame. On the other hand Middle Son felt a sense of vindication. He felt that he showed “them”, that “they” couldn’t push him around, that at long last he had fought back, and that he was from this moment forward not going to be a victim anymore. In some ways he was right. The tormenting did decrease dramatically and I do believe that Middle Son had earned the respect of some of his tormenters by both his actions and the subsequent suspension. But the isolation increased. He became totally and completely isolated from any sort of peer interaction whatsoever. He hated the school and he blamed me and still does for making him go there.

5.4.34 Another IEP

If Middle Son was suffering at the junior secondary school Daughter was not faring much better at the neighbourhood public school that she went to for grade six and grade seven. In grade six she had Mr. Tall (who
was) and in grade seven Mr. Desk (who ordered a special desk for her which
to this day causes her tears of humiliation). I do not remember the exact
circumstances but in the fall of grade six she too was assigned an IEP. I
suspect my view was that it was inevitable. I was called to the school and I
met with the principal (a petite blonde woman I called Mrs. Petite), Mr. Tall,
and the special education teacher Mrs. Needle (her true surname always
makes me think of sewing). They suggested that Daughter needed to have a
modified program in both English and Mathematics. It was their opinion that
her writing output was very poor and illegible, that she lacked social skills,
and that she had a difficult time interacting with peers. They suggested that
she be sent to Mrs. Needle in a group of four students who were having
trouble in reading and writing and that she be sent for one-on-one instruction
in mathematics. I didn’t put up any resistance to the notion at all. I signed
whatever paper work was necessary and it was done again.

For the first few months Daughter did not seem to mind these
arrangements. She liked Mrs. Needle and she was participating in the
reading group and enjoying it. She did seem to have one particular tormenter
in her class, a big freckled faced boy, but Daughter always had a pretty sharp
tongue and she could take care of herself. Together they served a few
detentions for roughhousing on the playground, basically whacking and
shoving each other. She did go willingly to school although she made no more
friends than Middle Son did. She spent recesses talking to adults in the
school yard, aides or yard monitors, and she talked often at home about the topics of conversation that she had with those individuals. The other thing she talked about was her tormenter. I suspect that the other students viewed her as an outsider, big and tall with a strange accent. She was not happy nor was she completely miserable either but she was not having a normal school life either. She was excluded.

5.4.35 Humiliation and Betrayal

In the spring of that year there was another parent-teacher afternoon. I had told Daughter that I would not be going. It was my rule. But Mrs. Petite called me and asked that I come and meet with Mr. Tall and Mrs. Needle. They met me in Mr. Tall’s classroom. They sat together on two student chairs and I stood. Again I did not hear one positive word about Daughter from either of them. Mrs. Needle complained that Daughter dominated the group reading sessions. She answered all the questions before the others had a chance and she was very opinionated about the readings. She did not find this appropriate in a remedial reading group at all. Her writing output continued to be poor and illegible and she didn’t seem to be making any effort to improve it. Mr. Tall likewise had nothing positive to say. Daughter had very poor peer interactions. She seemed to have a chip on her shoulder and he constantly had to break up disputes mostly with her regular tormenter but with others too. They suggested that perhaps Daughter was a bully. It crossed my mind that the two who sat comfortably before me seemed
to fit more accurately my definition of a bully. Finally, any opportunity, 
ability, or desire I had to dispute the information that I was given, was 
completely removed by their last series of statements. They said that they 
thought that Daughter was not aware that she was entering puberty and 
that she smelled bad and needed to shower more and use deodorant. I was 
humiliated and left. I was crying. When I got home I told Daughter what they 
had said. She too was humiliated and was crying and felt a sense of betrayal 
so profound that I am not able to describe it to you.

In grade seven things went from bad to worse. The *modus operandi* 
of the IEP was changed from being pulled out of the classroom to an aide 
being supplied. This served to demonstrate to all the students that Daughter 
was a special education student who needed an aide. Daughter for her part 
found the aide a welcome conversationalist but she became more and more 
isolated from her peers. She hates Mr. Desk, her grade seven classroom 
teacher, to this day and is determined to write him a letter the day she 
graduates from university. She wants to say, “You were so wrong about me.”

### 5.3.36 An Italian Angel

You must think of the most Italian sounding Christian and 
surname you can imagine. It is truly my regret that I cannot use the real 
name of an Italian angel here. Eldest Son was graduating from high school at 
the Catholic high school. Middle Son was finishing grade nine at the junior
secondary school. As I mentioned previously the Catholic high school was full of community, traditions, and ritual. One of the traditions of the graduation ceremony was that each graduand light a candle and hand it to a younger brother, sister, relative, or friend. The idea was to pass the light that is education to the next generation. I was not positive that Eldest Son would invite Middle Son to be his candle receiver as they were not and are not close as brothers; so much uncertainty always accompanies any activity that involves Middle Son. But to his credit Eldest Son did invite Middle Son. Middle Son refused to dress appropriately for the ceremony and Eldest Son tolerated that too to my amazement. He wore black shorts, a white tee shirt with writing on it, and one half-fingered leather glove. Before the ceremony there was some sort of rehearsal in which graduands and candle receivers participated. It was at this rehearsal that one of the most significant conversations of Middle Son’s life took place.

Angelo Italiano was in grade eleven at Eldest Son’s school and he was helping out with the staging and organization of the graduation ceremony. He was an easygoing popular kid and was in Eldest Son’s circle of acquaintances. He was introduced by Eldest Son to Middle Son. He asked Middle Son where he went to school. Middle Son said he went to In town Junior Secondary. Angelo asked him if he liked it there. He said he didn’t. Angelo asked, “Why don’t you come to this school next year? This is a really good school.” Middle Son could not believe that a grade eleven student of the
stature of Angelo had spoken to him so kindly, encouragingly, and welcoming. He was practically overwhelmed. From that moment on he knew which school he wanted to go to next year.

You may think that Middle Son would then have spent the year following Angelo around like a puppy. That is entirely the wrong thing to be thinking. Middle Son knew then and knows now boundaries. I remember being in the mall once with Middle Son and we were passing in front of a sporting goods store. I heard his name called out and he turned back and went in the store. It was Angelo who worked part time at the store. He said, “Hey man, what are you up to? I haven’t talked to you in a long time. Don’t just walk by the store. Come in and chat.” I do not really know if this is a story about Middle Son or Angelo. The fact of the matter is that Middle Son had been so tortured and tormented by fellow students, teachers, administrators, the system, and even society as a whole that a simple act of kindness seemed like a miracle. He never forgot the kindness of Angelo.

When Middle Son was at the end of grade eleven unfortunately the enrolment at the school dropped to the point where it was no longer sustainable. He wrote a letter to the newspaper about the sense of community at the school, included in his letter was the story of Angelo Italiano. I heard via the grapevine that Angelo’s family was so proud of the story Middle Son told. Angelo Italiano is in his last year of study in Civil
Engineering at the University of Alberta at this writing. Civility, however, is something he already knows.

5.3.37 **A Sense of Community**

Of all the schools that my children attended, the Catholic high school that closed at the end of Middle Son's grade eleven year had by far the greatest sense of community. I have tried to figure out what made it a special place, for a special place it was. For Eldest Son in grade eleven and twelve it fit like a glove. As I said before he made lifelong friends there. For Middle Son in grade ten and eleven it was sanctuary. He had come from two years of relentless tormenting to one in which I do not believe he was teased even once. He had so much confidence by grade eleven that he ran for student council. He didn't win but he didn't even mind.

The school itself had a long history but not in the format as it was when my children discovered it in the late nineties. It had once been a residential school and the trailers that served as the residences remained on the property but most of them were no longer used. I do believe the Church still kept a few in working order but they were rented out to “those in need” for short periods of time. When the residential school closed it was reinvented under a new name as the Catholic high school. I am not sure for how long this iteration of the school had been going on for but I suspect it was about 10 years or so when we arrived on the scene. It had had a Christian brother as a
principal up until the year we arrived and there was a new civilian principal. There was some sort of division in the school based upon the leaving of the Christian Brother. Some students and parents were very supportive of the Brother and others were delighted to have overseen if not orchestrated his departure. It was not particularly our business and we neither got involved in nor did we enquire about the controversy.

The new civilian principal had a difficult task at hand. I do not know if he was particularly talented or not but what I saw was a school that worked. There was a profound sense of community. The kids genuinely cared and looked out for each other. And although the school was defined as a private school by British Columbia nomenclature it was not really. The students did pay tuition; I remember it was about $160 per month so it was not out of reach. In addition there was a scholarship program so the entire school was not middle-class. Despite the general reputation that residential schools have, many First Nations parents who had gone to the school themselves chose to send their children to this school. It was therefore more diverse than it might appear to have been on the surface. It was attractive to new Canadians especially for Italians, Portuguese, and Filipinos who took their Catholic faith somewhat more seriously than the lapsed generation. The school had a few students who, for whatever reason, had had difficulty fitting in the public school system. I can think of one friend of Eldest Son’s who fits this description. He was probably A.D.D. himself although he didn’t wear
that label. He was the first person Eldest Son met in this community and I think it was partly why he chose to go to this school. He had met him at the skateboard park the first week we lived in the community. Skateboarder was not within the regular group of clean-cut middle-class kids that Eldest Son would eventually run with at this school but he is still friends too with Skateboarder. At various times Skateboarder was suspended for “mooning” on the school bus, smoking illegal substances, and other infractions. But he too found a home in this school.

The school did have the support of parents and the parents were somewhat homogeneous as they were mostly Catholics. The school had traditions and rituals surrounding the graduation each year. Many parents had attended the school. Many on the faculty were long serving. The school was small. Even in its heyday in this format it had never been more than 350 students. When Eldest Son arrived in grade eleven it had about 200 students. By the time it closed at the end of Middle Son's grade eleven year it had dropped to 130. All of these attributes contributed to atmosphere and community. In the newspaper article that Middle Son wrote he said that fellow students at this school were not friends, they were family.

In the year that Eldest Son was in grade twelve the faculty unionized. I believe this was one of the last coffin nails. Enrolment had been dropping but there did not particularly seem to be any effort either publicly
or from the pulpit to try to reverse the trend. I may be more cynical than is necessary but I do find it odd that after the school closed and the Church sold much of what had been school property a Wal-Mart was built. What I know to be true is this: if this school had not been closing we would never have left this community when we did. I would never have torn Middle Son away.

5.4.38 No Dogwood

Despite the praises I have just sung of this school in many ways it was not a good place for Middle Son. The school was small and, therefore, had little in the way of programming for exceptional children. Furthermore, it was academically-oriented. I had been warned about this by Mr. Shared and Dr. Character as they had urged me to leave Middle Son in their school for grade ten. They said that the Catholic high school wouldn't be able to meet his programming requirements, besides they said, "We know Middle Son. We are used to him." But after the intervention of the Italian angel neither they nor I had any say in what school Middle Son would be attending. He was so determined.

Middle Son had come into grade ten with very few grade nine credits. He had to repeat a number of subjects. The school was run by a faculty council and the teachers made collective decisions about students. If I recall correctly the school was not on the semester system as the junior high had been and so Middle Son’s grade ten programme had been set for the
entire year. Towards the end of grade ten the teacher who performed the
duties of an academic counsellor called me and asked me to come to the
school. She told me that Middle Son's case had been discussed in faculty
council and although they truly felt that Middle Son was very happy in this
school, and the best thing that could be done was to leave him in this school,
truthfully they could not accommodate his academic learning needs. She
recommended that he be placed on a high school leaving programme as
opposed to a high school graduation Dogwood track. (The dogwood is the
provincial flower of British Columbia and the high school graduation
diplomas have a dogwood watermark, thus graduating in B.C. is sometimes
referred to as "getting a Dogwood"). He would take electives that he enjoyed:
art, drama, computers, things like that but no English, no mathematics, and
no science. Basically my agreement was a condition for allowing him to
continue in this school and so I agreed. I chose the child's happiness over his
academic future. In fact there was no choice.

5.4.39 A Space Circus

In the spring of the year that Middle Son was in grade ten the
school put on a very ambitious show that had a space cowboy or a space
circus or something like that at the centre of it. It was a musical that had
been written by the drama teacher based on a science fiction novel. The
undertaking for such a small school was enormous. The musical would have
been very suitable for a Las Vegas act and it reminded me of one that I had
seen recently although the name escapes me at the moment. (I cheated and
looked on the Internet. It was *EFX*. It originally starred David Cassidy but it
was Tommy Tune as the lead when I saw it.) Middle Son was determined to
be in the show. In truth I think his participation was helped along by Eldest
Son’s ex-girlfriend who had one of the leading roles and I think she
encouraged the drama teacher to give Middle Son a chance. Many of the kids
had to play more than one role in the complicated musical plot. Middle Son
had two roles to play. There was a lot of singing. One very attractive blonde
girl played a veterinarian or circus trainer or something. She had a very
complicated and robust dance number followed by a song as she contemplated
the necessity of euthanasia for her animals. I remember her voice was so
crystal clear and beautiful, almost haunting. There was at least two months
of rehearsal. The show played in the gym for four nights. The sets were
elaborate and complex. The drama teacher even went so far as to have a CD
made at a local studio. For every kid in that show you could see it was a
labour of love. They thought they were fabulous. We went to two of the four
nights taking friends who did not have kids in this school the second night.
Middle Son said and sang his parts beautifully. You could see he was so
happy. I bumped into the drama teacher in front of the grocery store about a
week after the show. I told him who I was, congratulated him on the show,
and thanked him for giving Middle Son a chance. He said that he had his
moments with Middle Son but that he and all the other kids had risen to the
occasion and he was very proud of everyone’s efforts. The “weird space
cowboy/circus musical should be Las Vegas show” performance was one of
Middle Son’s proudest accomplishments and ours too. Perhaps he had
overcome the lessons of the Christmas Concert so many years earlier. We all
reclaimed a little tiny bit of normal.

5.4.40  I Am a Penguin

In the spring that Middle Son was in grade eleven I ran into his art
teacher one day in the aisles of Overwaitea (a grocery store, part of the
Pattison chain) between coffee and pasta. She was a very enthusiastic, kindly
woman and she had encouraged him greatly. He even spoke of her in
collective terms, “me and Mrs. Coffee/Pasta, we artists.” I know her class was
a kind of sanctuary for him. She told me that she really enjoyed teaching
him, that they had great conversations about politics and art and just about
everything else, and that he had grown greatly including a level of self-
awareness and insight. (I must admit that the authenticity of her remarks
was greatly elevated as the conversation was taking place in Overwaitea and
not at a parent-teacher night where I was bracing myself for the inevitable
“But”.) She told me that she had recently sent home his art portfolio and she
asked me if I had looked through it. I said I had not. She told me I should ask
him to show it to me. She said that she thought he had done some really good
work including a piece that she found quite moving.
When I got home I asked him to show me the portfolio. In his usual non-communicative teenage way he grunted to me that it was on the bookshelf behind him, not quite showing but close enough, and I could look at it if I wanted to. I remember I was standing in the family room sort of halfway between the kitchen and the den where I had taken the portfolio from the bookshelf. I flicked through it. A still life painting of fruit. Anime. More anime. I wonder what the hell that’s supposed to be? A very good watercolour of the entrance to the school in winter. Another anime. Then I saw it. It was an 8 1/2 by 14 sheet of paper. On the left side there was a somewhat stylized drawing of a penguin swimming, no flying, underwater. On the right this caption, “I am a Penguin. I Might not Fly in the Sky, but I can Fly in the Ocean.” Now neither you nor I will ever again have to ask ourselves what it must feel like to be an A.D.D. child in a class, in a school, or in a life. It has been shared with us.

5.4.41 Victim No More

The first civilian principal had lasted three years and had been replaced partly in response to the teachers’ unionization and partly as a result of the fact that the old Brother supporters just never got over it, whatever it was. I believe that the Board tried to get someone with vision and drive that might save the school and so they selected a second civilian principal, however, it is also my belief that that train was already on the track and there was not much that the newcomer could truly do. In any case
Mr. Newcomer was in place when this story takes place as one of the old
nemeses for Middle Son returned in grade eleven in the person of the
physical education teacher.

It was quite late in the academic year as cross-country running was
the activity. At the earliest I would guess it was late April around the time
that the announcement had been made that the school would be closing.
When I got home one evening Middle Son told me that I might be hearing
from the school. He said that the physical education teacher had them doing
laps around the track and he had a hard time keeping up. He assumed he
could finish when everyone else had although he had done fewer laps. But the
physical education teacher would have none of it. He said he must stay out
there and keep doing laps until he had completed the required number. They
got into a shouting match. Middle Son returned to the track but when he got
to the end of the track he ran off into the bushes and then ran home.

I had learned by this time in these cases it was best to strike first
and so I called the school and spoke to Mr. Newcomer. When I told him what
had happened I heard a very good natured laugh on the end of the phone. He
said he would speak to Middle Son and the physical education teacher. The
teacher had reported that Middle Son was undermining his authority by not
being compliant and he would have none of bending rules or making
allowances. The physical education teacher described Middle Son as defiant.
As I previously mentioned the faculty council essentially ran the school. This particular teacher was a long-serving member and no doubt his opinion counted for more. Mr. Newcomer attended the next physical education class and saw for himself the conflict and the resolute will of the two combatants. He took Middle Son aside and out of the class. Middle Son was so angry and was crying. He punched his fist into the brick wall of the school. Mr. Newcomer concluded that there were irreconcilable differences and Middle Son served the rest of the semester physical education class in study hall often talking to Mr. Newcomer. He got whatever mark he had in physical education to the date when he did not go back to class. I think he may have just barely passed. Mr. Newcomer was life line number four. Without his intervention I do not know how this would have ended. Mr. Newcomer saw in Middle Son’s eyes that he would be victim no more.

5.4.42 Choosing Science Groups

The year that Eldest Son started university and that Middle Son entered grade ten at the Catholic high school, Daughter was in grade eight and entered the neighbourhood public high school. We still had our rule about not going to the same school and as this school had a pretty good reputation I thought it would be acceptable for her. Based on the recommendation from her elementary school for grade eight she was placed in special education English, Mathematics, and Science classes. After the first week the teacher had her switched to a regular English class because
she couldn’t figure out why she was in the special education class. She was switched to the class of a friend of our across the street neighbours. A few years later, when I met him on a social occasion, Mr. Friend told me that Daughter was one of the brightest students he ever had. By the time Daughter reached grade nine her IEP called for her being in Essentials math as the only accommodation. Otherwise she was in all regular classes and although at this point she was not the dedicated student that she has grown to be in post-secondary education she was most certainly coping academically with B’s and C’s. She had a young but very pleasant recently divorced woman as a teacher in mathematics and science in grade eight and for the most part went to school willingly. She was active in the drama club in both grade eight and nine and did have a few acquaintances with whom she hung out with from the drama room.

But just as problems resurfaced for Middle Son as recurring themes so did they for Daughter. In grade nine she was “Janis Ianed” for a second time. This time it was in science class and with a newly trained and educated substitute teacher. The teacher was in the class for about three weeks as Mrs. Recently had gone off for some minor surgery. An assignment had been given and as individual students finished she told them to form groups and get started on the assignment for tomorrow. Although Daughter had finished early, no students would let her join their group. She was still distraught and crying when she got home. I phoned the teacher and told her that I did not
think this was an appropriate way to assign groups. The next day Daughter came home with a sincere apologetic letter that tried to offer an explanation. The substitute teacher claimed that she did not realize how immature the students were. The problem was that just as it had been the case years before with Manteau Gris the letter was addressed to me and not to the person who deserved the apology at all.

5.4.43 Nicky Nicky Nine Door

It was in mid-autumn of the year that Eldest Son was in second year at the local university, Middle Son was in grade eleven at the Catholic high school, and Daughter was in grade nine at the public neighbourhood high school. It started first with phone calls, not many but a few, certainly no more than three. A boy would phone the house and ask to speak to Daughter then he would engage her in a conversation saying he was either some popular boy in school or someone else and say inappropriate things not particularly sexual but things like, “You know John Smith, he really likes you.” Daughter was not fooled by the cruel game and she would tell him to stop or to fuck off and she would hang up. I can’t remember if I reported it to the school at this point or not.

Anyway in short order it moved from the phone to the doorstep. One night at about 6 P.M. when I was not home, in fact I was in a hotel room in Vancouver, the next attack was launched. A boy about Daughter’s age rang
the front door bell. Daughter answered the door. In the bushes were four or five other boys laughing as the bell ringer asked Daughter if she would like to come out. She slammed the door and went back in the house. The five chums laughed hysterically on the lawn. I am not sure what they were expecting but when Daughter got back in the house she was, of course, humiliated and crying. The chums were only lucky that it was Eldest Son and not Middle Son who she encountered and told what had happened to. He ran out the front door and chased them. Then he ran to the side door and jumped in the car. By this time they were walking and not running. He pulled up beside them in the car and grabbed one of them and almost pulled him through the car window. He said, “Leave my sister alone or you will deal with me.” He went home and told Daughter that he recognized one of the kids as a kid who lived on our street but that he didn’t know who the others were. For his part he felt like he’d done what he could and because he had planned to go somewhere that night, off he went. But the commotion in the house continued. When Middle Son heard of the incident, he began to plot revenge. His schemes went from swords and knives to bombs. He was very agitated and very angry. Middle Son and Daughter phoned me in the hotel and told me what had happened. I also heard some of the revenge plots that Middle Son was hatching and I was concerned that if the tormenters came back, especially without Eldest Son in the house, I did not know what might happen. I called a sensible level-headed friend of mine who lived nearby, explained what had
happened, and asked him if he would go over for the evening to try to calm things down. I was crying in Vancouver when I was talking to Levelheaded on the phone. Levelheaded went over and calmed things down and waited there until Eldest Son returned. By then it was about 10 P.M.

The next morning I called Daughter’s school. I can’t remember if I asked for or was referred to a Vice Principal. I told her my story and she said the school would conduct an investigation. She said that the school counsellor would also be in touch with Daughter. Daughter told me that the school counsellor called her into her office and she was asked to tell what had happened. She did. She offered the name of the kid that Eldest Son had recognized. She did not know the kid who came to the door. She offered some of the names that had been used in the previous phone calls. She was not particularly upset anymore. She was very surprised and proud of the fact that Eldest Son had jumped to her defence and in some ways she was resigned to the fact that that was the way the world treated her. Like me, she was most interested in not having it happen again because of the unpredictable reaction that Middle Son might have if it did.

At the end of the second day after the incident I received a phone call from the Vice Principal. She told me that the school had investigated and that they were satisfied that they had found those responsible. They did not anticipate that there would be further incidences and that if there were,
Daughter should let them know. I do not know if the chums were punished by the school or not as that information was not offered to me and I did not ask. The next night I received a phone call from the mother of the kid who lived on our street. She told me that I should tell my daughter to stop telling lies about her son and that her son would never be involved in anything like that. I said he was as Eldest Son had seen him. She said that he must be mistaken. I said she should ask her son to tell the truth and hung up the phone.

5.4.44 Seven Syllables

In grade eight and nine Daughter participated in the Drama Club. She was mostly interested in acting but was assigned stagehand duties instead. She didn't mind and willingly did whatever was asked of her. There was a Drama room at the school and this is where she spent before-and after-school time. She took Drama courses too and she seemed to have a reasonable relationship with the Drama teacher.

In grade nine the school decided to put on a play that would be entered in the regional drama competition. There was fund raising involved around the play and one of the significant players, a grade twelve girl with a seven syllable name, was in charge of the fund raising or the play itself or both. In any case the fund raising effort included shovelling driveways after snow storms. Daughter participated in these activities and there was a group
of about eight or nine girls who went on the snow shovelling expeditions. I was quite happy with this as it seemed like she was being included. Daughter was a stage hand for the regional drama festival that took place at the local theatre. She was thrilled when they won the regional competition and heard that they would now be going on to provincials.

Within a few days she came home and told me that Seven Syllables had told her that the school/Drama Club would not be sending everyone to the Provincials and that Daughter, whose role was not important enough, would not be needed. Daughter said she understood and then she asked me what she should do. Should she keep going to the rehearsals to help out? Maybe I did not think carefully enough about my answer, but I said she should. It was the wrong thing to do as I guess I didn’t realize the message that was truly being sent. That night she came home and told me that Seven Syllables did not want her coming anymore and to make matters worse, since she was there today, Seven Syllables gave her an assignment which was to think about and to write down the reasons that she had not been selected to participate in the Provincial festival. She was devastated. So was I. I let her stay home the next day.

The next morning I went to the school and I went straight to the Drama room. I found the Drama teacher. There were several kids in the room but I didn’t care. I first started in a soft gentle voice and told him who I was. I
told him what Daughter had been subjected at the hands of Seven Syllables. I
said that neither Daughter nor I was upset at the fact that she wasn’t going
to the Festival but that what I, at least, was upset at was the assignment she
had been given by Seven Syllables. He began to offer some excuse that he
didn’t know what I was talking about and that it was essentially a student-
run project. By this time I was both shouting and crying. I told him, “I don’t
care. You were the adult in charge and therefore I will be holding you
responsible. This room was once sanctuary for Daughter, now it is a hell
hole.” He was looking embarrassed and he sheepishly said that he would
investigate. My next stop was the Vice Principal’s office, the same one that I
had dealt with the previous fall. I told what had happened and what I had
said to the Drama teacher. She too said she would investigate.

When Daughter came home the next day she had a written letter of
apology from the Drama teacher. For the first time in our collective school
lives the letter of apology was at least written to the person who deserved it.
Daughter also told me that the school counsellor had asked to speak to her.
She said that the school counsellor was proposing mediating a discussion
between Daughter and Seven Syllables. I did not approve as I did not see
what there was to be mediated. However, since Daughter did seem
comfortable with the proposal for mediation, I said nothing. I felt that there
would be an unequal power relationship, the mere fact of a grade nine versus
a grade twelve if nothing else, in such mediation. It was my view that Seven
Syllables needed to learn a lesson from the incident. It was also my view that mediation, in which it would be assumed that Daughter accept part of the blame, was not appropriate. But I said nothing.

The mediation was handled even less professionally than I had hoped. The counsellor brought the two girls together and said that she understood there had been some sort of conflict between the two of them and that she was just going to leave the room and that they should try to work it out. In the end Daughter was bullied into an apology to Seven Syllables for getting her in trouble. The counsellor came back in the room. The girls reported the issue had been resolved. I was outraged when Daughter told me but she also said, “Mom, just let it go. I will drop out of the Drama Club.” And I did and she did.

5.4.45 Also Coincidently Italian

That spring I had a new employment situation presented to me that at the time felt like the opportunity of a life-time. It would require a move to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Middle Son’s beloved high school was closing anyway and he would have to find a new school for grade twelve in any case. Daughter was not particularly happy at her school. Eldest Son was in university and had a steady girlfriend and probably should be on his own. My husband was away from Monday to Thursday night at the mine and therefore it would make little difference. So we decided to move once again.
We even saw it as an opportunity for everyone. We paid for half of Eldest Son’s rent and my husband stayed with him every other weekend and every Sunday night. We thought it was good transitioning into independence for Eldest Son and an opportunity for a new beginning for Middle Son and Daughter.

We found a suitable house without too much effort in a suburban community and things seemed to be falling into place. We were even fortunate that our house was basically on the dividing line between the catchments of two different high schools. I pleaded my case to the two principals involved and so Daughter went one way and Middle Son the other. Appointments were set up with the counsellors at each of the schools before school started.

I took Daughter to West Secondary School and she met with the counsellor, selected her courses and, except for continuing in Essentials mathematics, was registered as a normal student. I took Middle Son to East Secondary School. Although Daughter had gone in by herself, Middle Son wanted me to go with him and I wanted to as well. We went into the school and sat in a line-up with other parent/student combinations. The pairing, a son and his father, right before us was conversing in either Mandarin or Cantonese. The counsellor came out of the office and approached them. The son said, “My dad does not speak English but he has a few questions.” They
were also fiddling in their hands with some official looking documents. All three then disappeared back into the counsellor's office I assumed to answer dad's questions. After about 20 minutes or so they came out. The counsellor held a file folder with Middle Son's name on it and came towards us. He introduced himself. By his name at least he was also coincidently Italian.

Mr. Coincident showed us to his office but before we reached the door Middle Son had clearly changed his mind about my participation. He blocked the door and said to me, "I want to do this myself, I don't want you." I kept heading in the office. He became more forceful and Mr. Coincident said that it was okay he would meet with him alone. I was embarrassed and sat in the waiting room. About 20 minutes later the two emerged and Middle Son seemed quite happy. Mr. Coincident asked about where records could be obtained as the previous school had closed. I suggested either the parish office or the school that Middle Son had indicated as his choice in the former community and we left. When we got to the car Middle Son told me that Mr. Coincident had given him a time table and that he was going to try to help him get back on a Dogwood track. He said that Mr. Coincident couldn't believe he wasn't on a Dogwood track. Records were obtained and indeed Mr. Coincident helped him get on a Dogwood track. He also arranged suitable academic accommodations for Middle Son and assigned him to a learning skills officer. She helped him with accommodation and other issues too.
Between the two of them they saved this child’s academic life. In June he took provincial examinations and graduated with a Dogwood.

Mr. Coincident was the last and final life line for Middle Son. He is now four years out of this school and still he occasionally goes back and sees Mr. Coincident. Mr. Coincident also phoned me frequently to let me know what was going on. He was on speed dial on my office phone and he intervened more than a few times on behalf of Middle Son that year. I cannot believe the good fortune we had in finding someone so good at what he did at this late stage of the game. He was salvation.

5.4.46 Falling

The first day that Daughter went off to West Secondary she was worried about making friends. I don’t think she could have tolerated another three years of isolation and exclusion. I told her, “Look for someone who is like you and try to make friends.” I do not know if she actually heeded this advice or even what I meant by it but at lunch that day she met a couple of kids who she is still friends with to this day. By the end of the week she was invited to visit the home of one of them and four years later they still spend days together, on the phone, at each other’s houses, and on MSN. This particular girl also had a wide circle of other friends and she introduced Daughter to them too and she seemed to fit like a glove in the group. For the first time in her entire life Daughter had a best friend, she had a circle of
friends, and she was happy in school. She also started to do much better academically. It was an amazing transformation.

It is why the next incident was so regrettable. It was December 17 of the year she was in grade ten. My husband had driven Daughter to school. The temperature was a little cooler than normal for Vancouver and there was frost on the ground. In front of the school were a series of trees, saplings really. Around each sapling was an iron grate. However, one of the saplings had died and around where it had been instead of the iron grate was a piece of plywood. When Daughter stepped on the plywood she stepped on to sheer ice. She fell very hard. Her face was bleeding. She couldn't immediately get up and walk. As she had had previous experiences with dislocation of the knee cap, she wasn't too sure what had happened. My husband saw her fall. He helped her, with some difficulty, get back in the car. He saw the principal and yelled at him that the conditions of the sidewalk were not safe and that he'd better do something. He brought Daughter back home. He called me from work and I went home too. We took Daughter to the emergency ward of the local hospital. Her face and hand wounds were bandaged. Her leg was wrapped. The diagnosis was stretched ligaments and she was given crutches. Although she has a small scar above her top lip, in about 10 days in fact, she was no worse for the incident. Except this. Her best friend's birthday is December 18 and hers is December 19. They had planned to celebrate together as it was Daughter's sixteenth birthday. They could not because
Daughter could not get around well enough. You cannot bring back the sixteenth birthday of a girl who has been isolated and alone most of her life who finally has a best friend who has a birthday the same time as hers. And this opportunity is lost because the school yard is not maintained properly.

There is a positive side to this story though; when Daughter did go back to school on December 20 her friends helped her get around. They carried her books, got elevator keys, and they did other helping things. When I came to pick Daughter up that day she was surrounded by kids all wishing her well and excitedly handing me books and papers and other belongings. This too was an amazing transformation.

5.4.47 We Leave Nothing Unresolved

During his one year at East Secondary School there was only one incident that spun out of control for Middle Son in the way that things normally spun out of control for him. Either Mr. Coincident didn’t catch it in time or it was just inevitable I am not sure which. As I mentioned previously Middle Son was an enthusiastic artist. He enjoyed art and in many ways I felt he had the soul of an artist. I am no one to judge whether he had the talent of an artist or not. He was certainly miles better than me, but I did not see him producing works of high realism if that is the definition of talent, although many of his works spoke with great emotion, passion, and much sadness.
In grade twelve the artist's soul was snatched from him I fear permanently. The school was semestered and he took art in the fall term. The art teacher was 64 years old in her last year of teaching before retirement. The class was the first class of the day at 8 A.M. The fact that Middle Son was chronically late was where it began. Even though I drove him in the morning I can bear no responsibility for his chronic lateness. I would try desperately to get him ready on time but he simply would not comply. This had been going on for years. For the 13 years he was in school I was in tears almost every morning, mostly tears of frustration, as I tried to get him ready on time. At the last minute he would always go back to retrieve a different CD or a game or a book or a magazine that we wanted to have with him for the day. It would never be in the first place he looked.

The art teacher warned him about the lateness verbally a couple of times and then she gave him a detention. I do not remember if he served it or not but he immediately saw his relationship with her in terms of a power struggle. She wanted to order him around and he would have none of it. I think, thereafter, he was late on purpose. He began to see that she was also picking on him in class. He observed that she did not appreciate his kind of art, that she favoured realism, and, from his perspective at least, she favoured what he described as "the goodie two shoe" Asian kids. He took a few art classes as discretionary days. He got angrier and angrier.
Finally he wrote her a letter. I actually saw the letter. It basically said "Dear Mrs. Retiring I hate you". I did not think he would send the letter and he did not. He did, however, show the letter to a friend. I will tell you that the friend was Asian although I do not know if that fact is important or not. The friend was in Middle Son's class and he really liked Mrs. Retiring but he could see that she was picking on Middle Son. The friend genuinely tried to mediate between Middle Son and Mrs. Retiring. The friend told Mrs. Retiring about the letter.

Although Mrs. Retiring did not see the letter but only heard a description of it, she reported to the Vice Principal that a student had written a threatening letter to her. I cannot remember if the school called in Middle Son or not but they called my husband, who was at the mine literally hundreds and maybe even thousands of miles away. He called me and said that Middle Son had threatened a teacher, that he had had a call from the Vice Principal, and that I had better get to the bottom of it immediately. By the time I got his message it was probably around 5 P.M.

When I got home I asked Middle Son what was going on. He told me that he had shown the letter to his friend and basically that was all he knew. Early the next morning Middle Son and I camped outside Mrs. Minecaller's office. She arrived eventually, noting that we did not have appointment, I told her we wanted to talk to her anyway, and she
accommodated us. She was a fairly young and attractive blonde woman but I was impressed right away. I told her that she had called my husband at the mine, that he was very concerned, and that we wanted to understand what the call was about. She said that she did not know that my husband was at the mine, that he had never offered that to her in the conversation, that they had tried my office but had not gotten through, and, therefore, they called his place of employment which was a local number. I explained to her that it was a satellite number. She said she had noticed a delay but assumed he had her on a headset or speaker phone.

We then got to the heart of the matter. She said that Mrs. Retiring had reported that Middle Son had written a threatening letter. I asked her if she had seen the letter. She said she had not. I said that I had seen the letter and that it was not threatening. It was not nice but it did not contain a threat. I asked Middle Son where the letter was now. He was not sure if he still had it or not. We looked through his book bag but did not find it. I asked him if he had given the letter to anyone. He said he had shown it to his friend but that he had not given it to him. Mrs. Minecaller then asked Middle Son to tell her why he had written the letter in the first place, leaving aside for the moment the issue of whether the letter was threatening or not.

Middle Son said that Mrs. Retiring did not treat him appropriately. He said that she did not respect him as a person or as an artist. He then said
some of the things she had said to him. When he did so, he threw his voice
into a whiny tone. Mrs. Minecaller immediately gained my attention and
respect when she forthwith told him that using a mocking voice when
repeating someone else's conversation was in itself disrespectful and that if
he wanted to be heard he was to report Mrs. Retiring's conversations in a
normal voice. He continued but she had to remind him a couple of more
times. In the end Mrs. Minecaller proposed a meeting between Mrs. Retiring
and Middle Son. She said, “At this school we do not leave issues unresolved.”
I was again impressed. I was also very impressed with Middle Son. He said
immediately, “I will not meet with her without an advocate present.” I
thought to myself now there is a kid who has been around the block a few
times. Mrs. Minecaller thought that the idea of an advocate was a good one.
We discussed who the advocate might be. I think Middle Son suggested Mr.
Coincident or the learning centre officer. Either was agreeable to
Mrs. Minecaller and we left.

In the end Middle Son and Mrs. Retiring met. Each had an
advocate. Middle Son agreed to try not to be late and to just get through the
course and he did. He did one portrait of Penelope Cruz that Mrs. Retiring
liked. But he never thought of himself as an artist again.
5.4.48 Advanced Placement

Although I was aware that Daughter had undergone a transformation at West Secondary School I was not aware of the extent. Or perhaps it was not a transformation at all but like everyone else I too was guilty of just not seeing her as she truly is. She has long expressed an interest in Psychology or at least in understanding what makes people tick. In grade twelve she applied for, and was admitted to, the Advanced Placement (AP) course in Psychology. She took the course in the fall term and managed a respectable C plus. She was determined to take the AP externally administered examination despite the fact that it would not be given until the spring term. She kept her psychology book in her bedroom and I think did look at it from time to time. But to be completely honest when I signed the cheque for the AP Psych. examination I thought to myself, “Now there is a waste of $120.” But I was wrong and the teacher was wrong (What do you mean a C plus?) and the school system for so many years was wrong about this child. She received the equivalent of a college grade “A” on the externally administered AP Psych. examination. And on this positive note our collective life at school was over.

5.5 Summary of Chapter Five

The narrative chapter begins with the normal events of school life as Eldest Son went to school. As Middle Son entered school more complex and difficult relationships with the school developed. My experience of my children’s school changed
from positive or neutral to negative. For the most part this continued with Daughter’s schooling experience as well. Hope became despair.
6.0 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Outline of Chapter Six

I return to the work of Max van Manen and specifically apply his hermeneutic phenomenology approaches for recognizing themes to my narrative. I ask the reader to return to the analogy of the very cold cross country skiing excursion and the two tracked journey, pushing on the intellectual and academic track and pushing on the personal and self-discovery track. I have provided a Stanza of Essence, using the word “essence” in the phenomenological sense, to complete the analysis of the narrative using a wholistic approach. This process allowed me to identify some salient themes. I have explored the themes in detail using the selective reading approach. The themes are further reinforced by the detailed reading approach.

6.2 Back to Van Manen

This analysis required going back to van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology work as presented in Chapter Three. He identified three approaches that could be used to recognize significant themes in the narrative: the wholistic approach, the selective reading approach, the detailed reading approach. Although I used all three I believed that the most significant illumination came from the first two approaches. The last approach was more problematic with autobiographical writing. Asking yourself why this precise word was chosen was rather schizophrenic and the answer had you changing the word rather than looking for enlightenment and explication. I will now confess to those changes, or at least changes I have wanted to make. My sister-in-law, Jill Browne,
and a couple of other early readers of my narrative pointed out that I engaged in stereotyping of my own. I identified race of people for “no reason”. I admitted to this in the narrative. I also described women, in particular, by age and stature, again for no particular reason and even implied in the vignette entitled ‘We Leave Nothing Unresolved’ that I was surprised that the attractive blonde Vice Principal was effective. I wanted to change these descriptions, however, I decided not to. I left the narrative as it was written, warts and all. My reason for doing this was that it might be useful to a future researcher who wished to analyze the vignettes in particular using the third of van Manen’s approaches. My three stages of narrative were left intact then: living it, writing it, and analyzing it.

6.2.1 The Wholistic Approach

In order to approach the narrative wholistically, I began to think about what was its essence. “Essence is not a single, fixed property by which we know something; rather, it is meaning constituted by a complex array of aspects, properties and qualities—some of which are incidental and some of which are more critical to the being of things” (van Manen, 2000, p. 3). I also returned to Schön (2000) and I began to think of the forms that reflection can take. I created what I called my Stanza of Essence.
I sent my children to school.
I sent my children to school and they were helped.
I sent my children to school and they were harmed.

I sent my children to school and they were harmed and I intervened.
I sent my children to school and they were harmed and I intervened and the harm was reversed.
I sent my children to school and they were harmed and I intervened and the harm was not reversed.
I sent my children to school and they were harmed and I failed to intervene.

(I note that the stanza takes the shape of a tree. It reminded me of the motto and crest of my *alma mater* the University of Toronto, “*Velut Arbor Aevo*”, always translated by me as “As is the tree so shall the birds be.” I always thought it was a fitting motto for an institution of learning.)

I began to think about each line and mapped the vignettes on the Stanza of Essence. Many of the first vignettes, mostly about Eldest Son, mapped on the first line. The vignettes that involved the life lines and two fellow students, Lydia in ‘What Lessons Can be Learned from a Christmas Concert?’ and, of course, Angelo Italiano, mapped on the second line. Many of the vignettes especially those about Daughter and to some extent Middle Son mapped on the third line, including ‘Cochon Anglais’, ‘On Strike’,

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26 I made this observation before I read Newfoundland poet Carl Leggo’s poem “July Patchwork Quilt” in his book *View From My Mother’s House*. Since some of my narrative takes place in Newfoundland and there is a possibility that we may have shared readers, I wanted to make it clear that my imitation of him was accidental. I provide Stanza 8 of “July Patchwork Quilt” below:

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* 8 *
  fir
  aspen
  juniper
  alder ash
  spruce pine
  poplar balsam
  tuckamore birch
  oak
  elm
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‘What Lessons can be Learned From a Christmas Concert?’, ‘What’s Wrong with This Picture?’, ‘On the Richter Scale’, ‘Janis Ian’, ‘Humiliation and Betrayal’, ‘The Stool and Disneyland’, ‘Victim No More’, ‘Nicky, Nick Nine Door’, ‘Choosing Science Groups’, ‘Seven Syllables’, and ‘We Leave Nothing Unresolved’. In all but three of these either I or my husband intervened. Alone in the harm being reversed and therefore mapping on the fifth line is ‘On Strike’. In this case although my children came home scared and concerned for their safety, it was an area in which they had confidence that I possessed expertise and as a result I was able to empower them to stand up against their fears and the inappropriate rhetoric. It could be argued that the gym teacher in the first ‘Janis Ian’ reversed the harm, but it was not long-lasting as it happened again later to Daughter. For all the rest, the harm remained. Of these, four resulted in Middle Son being harmed to the point where he developed a sense of rage. These were ‘What Lessons can be Learned From a Christmas Concert?’, ‘The Stool and Disneyland,’ ‘Victim No More’, ‘We Leave Nothing Unresolved’. The three in which I did not intervene were: ‘Janis Ian’, ‘What’s Wrong with this Picture?’, and ‘Humiliation and Betrayal’. I am sorry to say all of these involved Daughter.

I began to ask myself why? to each line in the stanza, rather like the fortune cookie game. I am sure you are familiar with the game where you read the fortune cookie and then you add the phrase “in bed”. I sent my children to school because it was the law. My expectations were that they would learn and be happy. These expectations were not to be upheld. I identified this juxtaposition of hope/despair, dashed Expectations as a theme. I sent my children to school and they were helped because they had the good fortune to find a few special teachers and a few special friends who cared. I sent my
children to school and they were harmed because they were different. It is through this process that I identified as potential themes what I originally called lack of diversity but have accepted that the literature (a push in the second track) (Gordon, 1999 with Yowell) referred to this as Cultural Dissonance. The difference we felt was beyond cultural difference but was also personal and private and more a sense of Otherness. The harm was so severe to Middle Son as mentioned above that he developed a sense of Rage. I sent my children to school and they were harmed and I failed to intervene because I was ashamed or exhausted or for some reason I just could not do it anymore. I was Silenced.

As I examined the lines of the Stanza of Essence I began to realize that some of the vignettes did not fit and the reason they did not fit was because they were not about the children. They were about me and my relationship with the schools/teachers. These included ‘I Am the Teacher’, ‘Moncton, Saskatoon, and Vancouver’, ‘Ambushed’, ‘Rolling in the Mud’, ‘Parent-Teacher Nightmares’, ‘Snow Pants and Lunches’, ‘A Broken Wrist’, ‘Uniforms’, and ‘Individualized Education Plan’. These were all ones in which the conversation was with me and not so much directly involving a child. In most of these incidences, I saw it one way and the teacher saw it another way. I assumed that teachers had professional opinions on these matters and were communicating with me as the amateur parent. I began to wonder why so much seemed to go wrong and I saw that it was the teacher’s own construction of their Professionalism and the manner in which they chose to have Communications with me that seemed to be the sources of the going wrong. These two, although not identified in the stanza, were identified in the broad literature as presented in Chapter Two.
I found it interesting that the vignettes clustered. The “off the rails” communication and professionalism ones generally came before the cultural dissonance, otherness, rage, and silencing ones. It was through the analysis of the Stanza of Essence, supported by the literature review of Chapter Two, and approaching the narrative wholistically that I was tentatively able to identify themes. I looked to the selective reading approach to verify them.

6.2.2 The Selective Reading Approach: The Themes

I have listed the themes in alphabetical order and approached them in that order as well: communications, cultural dissonance, expectations, otherness, professionalism, rage, and silencing. I reviewed the narrative backwards and forwards and have been able to fit every vignette into at least one of these categories. I looked at both the literature of involvement, satisfaction, and experience of Chapter Two as well as expanded the literature to include those relating to the specific themes.

6.2.2.1 Communications

Research noted the importance of establishing a home/school connection and its positive influence on a child’s development. The literature pointed to communication as the key to establishing this partnership with parents. “Regular home and school communication is important to children’s learning. When teachers and parents talk together about student progress, children do better in school” (British Columbia Teachers Federation, 2008). Or as Joyce Epstein put it, “Communications about school programs and student progress to mean two-way, three-way and many-way channels of
communication that connect schools, families, students and the community” (Epstein, 1995, p. 705).

Effective communication and trust developed with frequent and open communication. People were prone to misinterpret the meaning of a message depending on the frequency and openness of the communication. In order for communication to be accurate the receiver must interpret the information correctly (Hoy and Miskell, 1987). Many factors were present in the interpretation or understanding of face to face communication: voice intonations, facial expressions, body language, eye contact, experiences, emotions, attitudes, and culture. But whether spoken or written, communication involved talking (writing) and listening (reading) and then giving back, talking and listening and then maybe, also, interpreting and understanding.

Communication problems were sometimes the result of stresses between families and schools observed Herwig (1982). He further observed that the parents’ viewpoint of the teacher was as critic of their parenting skills. In the vignette ‘Rolling in the Mud’ my personal experience aligned with this observation. Baker and Stevenson (1986) and Deslandres, Royer, Turcotte, and Bertrand (1997) found that frequency of communication with teachers showed a negative relationship with school grades. Many vignettes in my narrative supported this observation. D’Angelo and Adler (1991) identified the importance of good news communications. My narrative recorded exclusively negative communication, more than 48 negative school interactions. I will add here that in the 19 years that my children were in school I had precisely two contacts that were good news. The first one was when Middle Son was at the Catholic high school
in the Interior and won an award that was given to a student who had overcome obstacles. The second one (as identified in ‘Seven Syllables’ and which did not have a happy ending) was as a result of Daughter volunteering for the Drama Club for two years for which she was given a service award. The call I had from the school invited me to the assembly when the award would be given. Smith (2001) stated that communications problems were one of the barriers to parental participation in the Individualized Educational Plan process. As mentioned in the two vignettes on IEP’s, these findings were supported in my experience, both describing almost no communications whatsoever. Problematic communications as a theme of parental experience of schools was identified in the literature and many aspects were supported by my narrative. I did not know what went wrong in my school communications but clearly something did. I observed that the schools did a lot of telling and not so much looking for feedback, and therefore not much communicating.

The maternelle children will be dressed in their Sunday best for the spectacle. The children will be off school property from 12 noon until 1:30 P.M. The parents will purchase a special scribbler for religion. You will bring vegetables to the Halloween party. You will call the school when your child is not returning in the afternoon even though he did not return this afternoon and two and a half hours later we the school take no responsibility for it whatsoever, therefore it is your fault. You are off tonight because I said a name that was not your child’s and based on the way I communicate, that is your fault. I do not accept responsibility for teaching the wrong provincial capitals, what difference does it make? There is no need to tell you that there will be seven people, whom you do not know, present at a meeting where they will character assassinate a
beautiful, precious four-year-old child. If your child rolls in the mud in the school yard, it must mean that you are inadequate. She cannot colour in the lines. Since you are so stupid as not to put snow pants or gloves on the child, I will communicate through your nine-year-old somewhat normal son in hopes that he can make you understand where I cannot. If we tell you enough times over and over again that your son’s broken wrist was the result of him tripping on the back step maybe you will believe us and not sue us. The school board did not tell me you were coming and these children are to be in uniform. We think the best thing to do would be to do as we say. We cannot control behaviour at the bus stop. It is not our fault. There is nothing we can do. Why would you be concerned about teachers talking about the strike? There is nothing that can be done from a discipline point of view when a teacher allegedly insults a child. Just line up like everyone else. Why can she read so well and not write? There could be criminal charges laid. She smells bad. He must do the same as everyone else.

He doesn’t have Sunday bests. But we live on the other side of town and it is too far for him to walk and I work too, downtown, and I only get an hour for lunch. I do not know what a cahier de catéchisme is. I want to bring cookies because they remind me of my own childhood and that could lead to a discussion around Halloween customs in other parts of Canada in a part of Canada where Halloween is not so much of a tradition. I sent my child to school today and every day. You said the wrong name, I am not off. The capital of New Brunswick is Fredericton, the capital of Saskatchewan is Regina, the capital of British Columbia is Victoria. I would have liked to have been fully informed what this meeting was to be about, who was to be present, and to have been given the opportunity to speak. I would like to be seen as the advocate for my child. She is not as
you say, yes perhaps a little less than perfect in fine and gross motor skills, but she is the most wonderfully dispositioned person on earth, always was, always will be. When he rolled in the mud he was in your charge, don't you have any responsibility in this whatsoever? I can't colour in the lines either, maybe it's genetic. I do put snow pants on him. I do put gloves on him. Maybe you should try helping me, and not hurting me and my children more. I do not like you using a nine-year-old as a go-between. If you have something to say to me say it to my face. I believe you that he fell on the back step while playing tag because that is what he told me. Why didn't the school board assistant superintendent tell you that we were coming or me that they were to be in uniform? I want to know more about my rights around this IEP process. Have you thought about how labelling may harm the child? You must teach them about world peace and it begins at the bus stop. Because my children are afraid that they will be attacked by the strikers: their lived experience is slashed tires, a poisoned dog, and a murdered friend. Well something should be done; teachers, like the rest of us, should have to live in the real world. When my brother was in school, the school had an effective scheme for parent-teacher nights, would you like to hear about it? Isn't that a question for you; you are the professional aren't you? Yes there could be criminal charges, and then my son should not be questioned or interviewed without a lawyer present. Why have you done nothing about the relentless teasing he has suffered at this school other than to blame him? That may be true but you need to find a much more diplomatic way of saying it to me and to her than you just did. I think you two are bullies. He is not capable of doing the same as everyone else. You should expect his best from him. That is all any of us are capable of.

But except for the provincial capitals, I never said a word.
6.2.2.2 Cultural Dissonance

The notion of cultural dissonance was described in the Yowell chapter in Gordon (1999). According to this view, dissonance meant an inherent lack of agreement between cultures. "Cultural dissonance" was the term used to describe a sense of discomfort, discord, or disharmony arising from cultural differences. These differences were unexpected and therefore difficult for individuals to negotiate. Dissonance took place at the cultural interchange and attempts to resolve it were easily misunderstood.

I have quoted elsewhere in the dissertation the words of the celebrant in the Newfoundland Screechin' In ceremony: “Now ye be one of we. Long may your big jib draw.” The problem was, as nomads of the Canadian mining industry, we never were “one of we”, ever. This might have led to some of the communications problems as outlined above and may have caused either us or the school to assume things about each other that were simply not true. Cultural dissonance between school and the parents or the family had the potential of leading to misunderstanding. Here, I was thinking of cultural diversity rather than the individual sort that otherness may be considered to be, which will be dealt with in a separate section.

This theme was also reflected in the literature, although not necessarily in precisely the way we experienced it. Clark (1983) found cultural style was effective when it mapped on the dominant discourse promoted by the school. As already noted in the narrative, our cultural style was for the most part not that of the societies in which we lived. I suspected, for the most part, that we were far too liberal as parents for the Catholic cultures in which our children went to school. Sister Mildred described both
Middle Son and Daughter to me as being “forward”. Dornbusch (1986) saw that family behaviour patterns that mapped on the dominant discourse influenced grades positively. As the narrative described, our family behaviour patterns were extremely influenced by, firstly, our itinerant lives and, secondly, by the presence of an A.D.D. child. Suffice it to say we did not map on the dominant discourse and therefore the literature would almost anticipate that we would have experienced cultural dissonance. Harry (1997) reported (although studying African American families) that the greatest conflict occurred when dealing with families that looked different than the educator. From strictly a cultural perspective, it was hard to know if we looked different from the educator or not. The issue of appearance is dealt with under the theme of Otherness. Sileo and Prater (1998) reported parent involvement decreased as the number of negative experiences increased. This was a finding that was supported by my narrative. Carnevale and Desrochers (1999) noted that cultural background played a role in the setting of parental expectations and therefore subsequent satisfaction. As parents with university educations ourselves we did have high expectations for our children, but that view was dissonant with the schools that labelled our children and had very low expectations for them. Finally, I called attention again to Raymond’s (2004) theme of the gazes of others. The literature certainly indicated that negative parental experience of schools was to be expected when there was cultural difference and then dissonance between families and schools.

We for the most part lived in dominant cultures of which we were not part. We were not French Canadians, perhaps seen as not cooperative from the school’s perspective. We were not Quebeckers, so we did not know about “en plastique” or the special scribbler. Perhaps I was seen as dragging my feet at getting these things done. I
did not know that green peppers were wrong. Eldest Son was not a *cochon anglais*. If there was not natural diversity, we inadvertently created it. Eldest Son figure skated instead of playing hockey. We did not know that Catholics wore uniforms to Newfoundland schools. Gentle and kind as the Newfoundland culture can be, we were always “come from aways”. We knew no music. When we moved to British Columbia we were Newfies, we had accents, and telltale vernacular. Diverse people get Janis laned, or left out of science groups. In the Lower Mainland we were not “goodie two shoe” Asian kids.

Cultural diversity when not acknowledged and addressed, significantly disrupted both learning and communications (Barrera and Kramer, 1997). Some of these were very subtle differences. But as nomads we had no extended family. Doing things was always more complicated for us than it was for others. We were penguins in a nation of flighted song birds, *always*.

Perhaps there was another diversity that made things more problematic between the family and the school. As a family we had accepted the diversity that was A.D.D. thoroughly and completely. The norms and beliefs that supported the cultures of A.D.D. families might not be the same as other families. As a parent of an A.D.D. child, I learned early that the only situation worth intervening in was one in which life or limb was in peril. Eldest Son and Daughter knew that no matter what, they were not going to get the first hot dog and they were not going to sit in the front seat of the car. It was the price to be paid for a semblance of order and the celebration of diversity. As mentioned in the vignette ‘Rolling in the Mud’, a licensed psychologist we consulted when Middle
Son was in grade one gave us what I consider to be life- (mine) saving advice: “Accept him as he is and get on with your lives.” And so we did. We gave up on conversion and we celebrated diversity. Eldest Son became a provincial level figure skater. Daughter grew to be six feet three inches tall and can find any object that goes missing in the house. And well, Middle Son was Middle Son.

We did not express to the school what was really happening in the dynamics of the family. We viewed the school as the expert and as a family we tried to give at least the appearance of compliance. I signed contracts and homework pages and any number of other ideas that the school tried to “help” Middle Son at least organize himself. The fact was that it was impossible for me to follow through. The whole family would have been swallowed up by the disruption that, for example, sitting with Middle Son while he completed his homework would have caused.

The schools operated on the medical/deficit model discussed by Comer (1986), Davies (1991), and Harry (1992). Middle Son was broken and was to be repaired and converted to normal. Taking the advice we had been given, we accepted him as he was and got on with our lives. It was, therefore, a legitimate question for the schools to have asked that if the family did not want the same things as the schools, meaning the conversion of the child, what did they want? Mittler (1996) gave the answer: “They desire recognition of the individuality of their child and the uniqueness of their families.” Further, Pat Burke Guild said, “The relationship of the values of the culture in which a child is currently living, or from which a child has roots and the learning expectations and experiences in the classroom is directly related to the child’s school success.
academically, socially, and emotionally.” We wanted Middle Son to be able to cope in the world as he was.

Have things changed in schools since my children’s time in the K–12 system? There was much talk about celebrating diversity and inclusive schools. Diversity, if it came in the form of physical disability, religion, skin colour, or even economic status could be and was celebrated and embraced by the culture of schools, but if it came in the form of A.D.D. then it was something to be overcome. A look at the various teaching manuals on the subject, Strichart and Mangrum II (1998), Mastropieri and Scuggs (2004), or Lewis and Doorlag (2005) gave a sense of the meaning of inclusion in the case of A.D.D. It meant conversion to as normal as possible. A visit to the Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education web site in 2005 revealed the answer: “The challenge for the teacher is to provide a structure while helping to develop in the child a sense of control in life.” A true celebration of diversity would not be looking at controlling surely, but a further reading of the site revealed even more interesting language. The site (emphasis mine) warned teachers about becoming “frustrated” as it seemed their students were “out to get” them. Teachers were further warned that they would be “confronted with students who cannot seem to keep track of their belongings.” The teachers were told to “identify target behaviours” and “to measure frequency of target behaviours.” It sounded adversarial and like the old medical model of “sickness, in need of healing” and not a celebration at all.

I noted hopefully that the website has since been revised:
Building empathy in teachers and parents will increase their ability to be effective and view the student's difficulty in the context of a disorder rather than purposeful misbehaviour or lack of effort. For greatest effectiveness, teachers are encouraged to work with parents to support students with AD/HD. For example, a communication book signed by parents can be used to ensure that parents are aware of issues that arise in class and teachers are aware of issues that arise at home. Both should ensure that positive messages are included frequently, as parents and teachers can grow discouraged when negative comments dominate communication (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2008).

Although, the thought of the inherent distrust that comes with a signed communications book left me still wondering.

6.2.2.3 Expectations

There was no doubt that my brought expectations played a role in the dysfunctional relationship that eventually emerged between me and the schools. In the beginning my expectations were no different than anyone else's. My reason for having children was the same as anyone's: to be a family rather than just a couple, to teach the lessons I had learned with the hope that that knowledge would help my children make the world a better place, and to love unconditionally and probably with the expectation of being loved unconditionally back. I was not so naive that I thought my children would be doctors or lawyers or play in the National Hockey League (NHL). I thought they would be able to fend for themselves as adults and they would contribute to society in much the same way as my husband and I saw ourselves as contributing. I thought that my responsibilities were about providing a safe home for my children and loving them. Beyond that I did not think about it at all. But, as I have already mentioned, parent-school interactions changed all that. Never for one second, as I stood beside the chain link fence
with Ballou licking my fingers nudging me on, did I ever imagine that the hope of that moment would be despair 19 years later uttering: “It’s over, it’s over. It’s finally over.”

For the most part the literature stated the obvious, that was, children tended to do better at school when the parents had high expectations. Despite the events of the narrative the eventual outcome of my children’s accomplishments were or will be: a Bachelor of Commerce (Eldest Son), a Bachelor of Arts in June 2009 (Daughter) and a Bachelor of General Studies in Education in June 2010 (Middle Son). The narrative described at least attempts to remove parental expectations, the dashing of hope and expectations. The literature only approached this obliquely. Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, and Killings (1998) identified that parents were positively involved when they had high expectations and aspirations. They did not, however, comment on the school actively dissuading parental involvement and dashing expectations, although this study indicated that such a scenario would have negative effects on grade point average. Masino and Hodapp (1996) found that parental expectations were influenced by parent education, race, and previous school performance for students with and without disabilities. It would have been useful for my purposes to have seen this study investigate further the issue of previous school performance’s role as an expectations dasher. My experience was implied by this but it did not go far enough to truly reflect my experience. In general, the literature saw a relationship between high parental expectations of the child and school performance. This was somewhat relevant to my study as my high expectations became despair and this no doubt had a negative effect on my children’s school performance. However, because there was a paucity of experience literature, the precise issue of dashed expectations in my narrative, not as a result of the children’s
performance but as a result of the schools’ performance, was really not addressed by the literature.

I did not think that my four-year-old son would have to deal with the death of his best friend. I did not think that any of my children would face blind name-calling prejudice. I did not think that a teacher (a professional) would teach the wrong provincial capitals and then take revenge on my innocent children because I had pointed out her error. I did not think that an incident of a child rolling in the mud in the school yard would irrevocably change my life. I did not think that I would ever be in a situation with a school where they assumed I would be litigious (for the record, I was not). By this time, I never thought there would be a teacher that would throw a life line but there was. I never dreamed that union agitators would scare the “be Jesus” out of my children in their own classrooms. I never dreamed that rage would be born of a Christmas Concert. I thought teachers had been taught not to allow the choosing of sides and the humiliation of Janis Ian. I did not think that one of my children would be so “bad” as to be expelled. I did not think that youth like Angelo still existed. I did not know that the penguin would become the symbol of my family. I did not know it was possible to have a seven syllable name and be cruel at the same time. I did not know that diversity as experienced at two different high schools in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia would bring peace and friendship where there had been none before.

On the contrary I had assumed that my children’s lives would have been pretty much like mine or my husband’s. I had been a good student. I was not popular but I had made a few friends. I had graduated university and could see a career ahead of me.
My husband was not much different. He had graduated university and was developing a professional career. We assumed it would be the same for our children. And perhaps in the end it will be. But the getting there was not like our expectations. I had thought that my children and I would be treated with dignity and respect. I had thought that when parents raised concerns that they would be listened to. I had thought that I would not be blamed for whatever there was to blame me for. I had not thought that Attention Deficit Disorder would be the key theme around which my life, my husband’s life, and the life of all three of my children would be organized. From Jill Browne:

The time and energy put into making sure Middle Son didn’t harm himself or others – and I think with an impulsive, energetic, defiant child that is the first concern, and it can totally wear the parents out – must have taken away from the time and energy you had for ordinary stuff like making dinner, keeping house, helping Eldest Son with homework, playing with all the children – whatever you can list, everything must have been a trade-off because one person required more attention. At NO point have I ever thought anyone in the family blamed Middle Son for things he could not control. However, everyone did have to adapt. When did you become aware that the adapting was exacting a price, and what did it mean to you? (Browne, Personal correspondence, October 2006).

But it was and is and that is how hope became despair and expectations were put aside for mere survival.

6.2.3.4 Otherness

Of all of the themes identified in the narrative Otherness was the one that I have thought about the most. It was the one that I took the most personal responsibility for. Communications were two way, two parties involved. Diversity or cultural dissonance was just a fact of being, not Québécois, not Newfoundlanders, not Asian, not
anything. Expectations being dashed was the luck of the draw construed passively or playing the cards you were dealt, construed actively. But I wondered about Otherness. Was it something I caused in my children? For whatever the reason, I had always been a “march to a different drummer” kind of person. It was a badge that I wore with pride but as I saw it played out in my children’s lives I saw pain. Did I teach them inadvertently to be Other? Was that the reason for the visceral reactions of peers and teachers? I knew that was a question I asked, but it is not one I could definitively answer.

The special needs literature addressed this theme to a greater extent than the abled literature. Leff and Walizer (1992) identified that parental concerns seemed to have common threads: vulnerability, guilt, and isolation. As previously indicated, my experience was expressed in this study. Green and Shinn (1995) reported that one-third of parents with special needs children involved in their survey did not attend any school conferences at all because of feelings of inferiority and other emotions. The literature on special needs seemed to indicate that one would expect to find, as a theme, the issue of Otherness in a narrative that involved two special needs children.

The world is white and male. The world is thin and of average height. The world is abled. The world is from here, not away. The world speaks the same language as I do with the same pronunciations and vernacular. In the world, boys play hockey, girls figure skate. The world is middle-class and urban. The world understands art, dance, and theatre. The world is educated. All else is to be Other.

Black bodies, white bodies; male bodies, female bodies; young bodies, old bodies; beautiful bodies, broken bodies - right bodies and wrong bodies. Historically, our bodies have framed our
futures and explained our past; our bodies write our stories. But it is not our bodies per se which write the story; rather it is the way in which we, as a society, construct our bodies which shapes our history and our future (Clapton and Fitzgerald, 2008. Retrieved from http://www.ru.org/human-rights/the-history-of-disability-a-history-of-otherness.html 2008-07-05).

Bodily difference has for centuries determined social structures by defining certain bodies as the norm, and defining those which fall outside the norm as 'Other'; with the degree of 'Otherness' being defined by the degree of variation from the norm. In doing this, we have created an artificial 'paradigm of humanity' into which some of us fit neatly, and others fit very badly. Life outside the paradigm of humanity is likely to be characterized by isolation and abuse (Clapton and Fitzgerald, 2008. Retrieved from http://www.ru.org/human-rights/the-history-of-disability-a-history-of-otherness.html 2008-07-05).

Where did I learn to be Other myself? Did my husband see himself as Other? Did we create Other children purposefully and did we cause the great pain that Otherness became because we chose the life of Otherness ourselves? When I first started to think about these issues relative to my narrative I experienced the exploration of my own sources of Otherness through a series of narrative writings, Otherness vignettes which are included as Appendix 1. My stock of knowledge pointed toward Otherness.

In any case, I suspected that we, by our own family histories, were predisposed to creating Otherness in our children. We actively encouraged marching to the beat of your own drum, being proud of being different, and of being independent and not compliant. In a school system that valued sameness and compliance coupled with two other factors it was a formula for, if not disaster, at least troubled water. Attention Deficit Disorder as already discussed was one Otherness factor; sizeism was the other.
We are people of size. My father was. I am. My husband is, but less so. Middle Son is and Daughter is. In some ways, I purposively avoided writing about it or calling attention to it in the narrative. It was there but only in the margins. In part I did this because I wanted to believe that with the right attitude, it was a strike against that could be overcome. This was no doubt a *Pollyanna* view of the world. The other reason I did not mention it more in the narrative was because I was embarrassed by it and lacked courage. I, therefore, leave it to my sister in-law to bring me and my narrative back to reality. Below were her words:

Later in my comments within the body of the paper, I go into weightism, prejudice, and the importance of first impressions. You and husband are by your own description large people. Do you think that any of the school communicators use size as a proxy for (low) economic class and low levels of parental education in communicating with you? I bet there are studies about the assumptions people make about people who are overweight; I wonder to what degree this carries over into the parent-school scenario (if at all). This is related to the theme of pre-judging. Overweight people are often marginalized. Does that have any bearing on the whole school experience?... I will try to elaborate. If school in studies perceived parent to be e.g. low econ class, did the school *a priori* lessen its quality of communication (in whatever ways that might be), OR was the overall poor communication due to school using same quality as with everyone, but parent was unable to hold up their end of the communication transaction? In the *a priori* situation, my suggestion about size as proxy might hold water. In the second case, it clearly is irrelevant to your situation, as you are able to hold your own in ordinary communication... (This was a general note provided at the end.)

Was this an issue? Do you think there was weight-based discrimination on top of everything else? Did the overweight relate to the ADD?.. (A note to 'Snow Pants and Lunches'.)

Having been overweight myself for many years I know about weightism. As an obese adult, I am a target for anyone with a self-improvement theory or plan they think I should try. An obese child (which I wasn't) – not only are they themselves a target but
so are their parents (e.g. examining the lunches). I don't think it's coming through clearly enough that Middle Son was dealing with negativity from people who judged him purely on sight, without his behaviour even coming into it, just on his looks, and I would bet that happened every day. (It certainly happened to overweight kids when I was a kid at school. Ron "Tub" Wilkins never had a day's peace from it)... (A note to ‘On the Richter Scale’.)

It's like body shape makes a person a legitimate target for this sort of bullying. Where do you think the teasers get that idea?... (A note to ‘Mrs. Masters’.)

Was he able to articulate why he didn't want to go? What was the teasing about? Was it based on weight and appearance, from people he didn't even know? (Just wondering if that is a continuing saga)... (A note to ‘Mr. Hockey’.)

(It is the weightism thing, too – some people just feel overweight people are there to be poked, prodded and driven until they magically become thin. I can totally see this PE teacher having a sort of boot camp mentality where you run until you're fit, no matter what)....(A note to ‘Victim No More’.) (Browne, Personal Correspondence, October 2006).

Said Blaine (2007), “Bias against obese students begins early in the educational process—anti obesity feelings and attitudes are present even in preschool children—and is expressed by classmates, teachers, admissions officers, and even parents” (p. 127). (I assume “parents” means parents of other children. In my own defence I refer back to my husband’s words in ‘On the Richter Scale’, ‘Middle Son is valued at home. We are all proud of what we look like and who we are in our house.’”) In their 2005 article, “Weight Bias in a Teen’s World”, Neumark-Sztainer and Eisenberg reported that in their interviews of over 500 overweight teens, school was indicated as the most common place where weight stigmatization took place. In their survey of school
teaching staff’s attitudes 54.8% strongly agreed that obesity was a consequence of lack of love or attention. Solovay (2000) reported:

Many parents of fat kids are fat themselves and may have a hard time speaking up for their child because they themselves suffer from low self-esteem or blame themselves for their child's weight. Some parents succeed in turning these feelings around. Watching their children repeat the suffering they survived can give some parents the confidence to take a stand (p. 53).

Price, Desmond and Ruppert (1990) found that 92% of physical education teachers indicated that they believed that eating behaviour played a significant role in obesity. I refer the reader back to both ‘On the Richter Scale’ and ‘Victim No More’. This type of thinking had negative implications in assigning blame for the condition.

Looking through the Otherness lens led to interpretation and understanding of the narrative, including and you will pardon the pun, thinking about the elephant in the room, of sizeism and weightism. Through this narrative process, as well as a review of the literature, I had learned to accept responsibility for the creation genetically, socially, and culturally of my children’s Otherness. I was able to say that; but it was half regret and half pride. (My pride was justified as demonstrated in the vignette in Appendix 1 entitled ‘With Apologies to Roch Carrier’.)

6.2.2.5 Professionalism

Although there was debate within both the teacher literature (including, e.g., Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996; Jarvis, 2002; Newham and Nease, 1970; Norlander-Case, Reagan, and Case, 1999; Shedd and Bacharach, 1991; Taylor and Runte, 1995) and the professionalism literature (e.g. Geison 1983; Jackson, 1970; Johnson, 1972; Larson,
1977) as to whether or not teachers were really professionals, I proceeded in this analysis on the basis that for the most part teachers thought of themselves as professionals. A look through the professionalism literature and the various definitions or descriptions of professionalism led to the conclusion that it was possible for teachers to think of themselves as professionals. Millerson (1964, cited in Johnson, 1972) provided a listing of the elements of professionalism which included: skill based on theoretical knowledge, the provision of training and education, testing the competencies of members, organization, adherence to a professional code of conduct, and altruistic service. Most teachers would argue that there was a fit. Turner and Hodge (1970, cited in Jackson, 1970) listed professions as having the following characteristics: substantive theory and technique, monopoly, external recognition, and organization. Again most teachers would argue that their work had those characteristics as well. Parsons (1968, cited in Geison, 1983) argued that professionals had the following characteristics: formal technical training in an institutional setting, skills in pragmatic application of formal training, and the ability to demonstrate adherence to an institutional mechanism to ensure that competence and skills will be used in socially responsible ways. Again most teachers saw themselves in this way too. I believed that the teachers I encountered, as described in the narrative, saw themselves in these ways and would be capable of defending their actions based on the characteristics and criteria as outlined above.

The literature of Chapter Two addressed this theme. Williams (1984) reported that professional educators supported parent involvement only if the parents received professional instruction reinforcing teachers’ construction of their own professionalism. Harry (1992) reported professionals as having deficit views of certain families of special
needs children. Seligman and Darling (1997), within the context of family systems theory, examined the roles and points of view of both professionals and parents and the interaction between the two as they related to children attending special education and diagnosed as disabled. As this sampling of literature indicated, teachers saw themselves as professionals who had superior knowledge to amateur parents, particularly in the case of special needs children. Again the literature indicated that one expected to find this theme identified in my narrative.

Professionals decided when and where their service was to be offered, therefore regardless of how inconvenient for the parent or dangerous for the child, going home for lunch in -40 °C was required. Teachers were professionals and therefore when your child does not return to school, even though you sent him it must be your fault. Professionals never made mistakes when they called parents and said the wrong name, therefore, it was your fault. Professionals never admitted to mistakes even when they made them, therefore, it was acceptable to say that Moncton, Saskatoon, and Vancouver were provincial capitals.

There were many professionals who had expert knowledge involved in the school enterprise, including psychologists, child and youth workers, and even professional administrators, as observed in the vignette ‘Ambushed’. My narrative revealed the teachers’ (and other professionals in school) perspective was as follows: We all know better than a parent, who is not a professional anything, and therefore, we will surround you and tell you that your child is no good, and this is what we think in our professional opinion, and you are not allowed to speak. If a child rolls in the mud for no
reason it is our professional opinion that the parents lack parenting skills. We, the professionals, think this child should have an Individualized Education Plan. We are professionals, so when we are teachers at school we treat your child very strictly, but when we retire and see him at A&W every Saturday morning, we hug and kiss him and joke around with him. In our professional opinion, as concert organizers, we find that this child cannot be organized and therefore, cannot participate and therefore, we will cause rage to be born in him in the basement of the Arts and Culture Centre. The purpose of a Christmas concert is to show off our professionalism. We are professionals, but because we are also union members, the rules that would apply to, say, a geological engineer in terms of how he treats people in his work place do not apply to us. It is my professional duty to tell you that there could be criminal charges (then it should also be your professional duty not to interview him without a lawyer present). I am a professional so it is my duty to tell you as cruelly as possible that your child stinks. I will arrange a professional mediation; we are all professionals here (except maybe not fellow students who will bully your child into an apology).

And there were professionals who behaved professionally: Mrs. Specialed, Mrs. Masters, Mr. Hockey, Mr. Newcomer, and Mr. Coincident: life lines all, as well as professionals.

If the teachers and others conceived of themselves as professionals and then proceeded to behave that way, it was me who gave them the space. Again Browne (2006) stated:
The putative power of experts, the instant acceptance and validation of their opinions, the lack of alternatives. It is very political… Notwithstanding the 60s, you and I are products of our age. We are conditioned to accept that the experts are in charge (because) that is the best and they know what they’re doing. It is quite interesting to compare those beliefs against the generations after us (Browne, private correspondence, October, 2006).

Teachers behaved as they did because they defined themselves as professionals and I, as a parent, let them behave that way because of the brought self, the stock of knowledge, or just plain deference. Deference to professionals was probably increased because of the official diagnosis of special needs. As Ogletree, Fischer, and Schulz (1999) explained in Bridging the Family-Professional Gap there was an extra layer of complexity when dealing with parents of children with special needs.

Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) identified the paradox of teachers’ professionalism, the pull between collective bargaining and acceptable professionalism. This was one of the issues that I was unable to resolve for myself. As I already indicated, I certainly behaved as though I accepted teachers as professionals as experts in their field. I accepted their expertise as I did that of a doctor, lawyer, an accountant, or an engineer. I followed their advice. Yet I wondered how a role for the parent in her child’s schooling could be carved out as long as teachers accepted the narrow vision of professionalism: I am the expert, you will do as I say.

6.2.2.6 Rage

Literature, including Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995), Cross (2001), and Kuykendall (2004) identified rage as part of a school experience. The literature also identified risk factors such as deficit disorders or giftedness. Packer (2005) listed “teacher
triggers of rage” and discussed teachers who “pushed a child known to have deficits past his or her limits” (p. 5). Since Middle Son was diagnosed as Attention Deficit Disorder and was uprooted frequently, he was “at risk”. Rage was identified in some literature as being a consequence of schooling. However, the idea for identifying rage as a theme did not originally come from the literature. And although this theme was connected back to the Stanza of Essence, that was not its origin either. It came from Jill Browne in the following correspondence:

Separate idea altogether, and it doesn't really fit here but I just stepped away for dinner and was thinking of a metaphor for your family, along the lines of my question of what is the myth of your family. What comes to mind is a castle/fortress, often under siege. The roles each of you play are shared, e.g. you and husband are both sentries and guardians, but you are also a messenger/diplomat, as is Eldest Son, getting out in the world and bringing back news and goods. The dragon in the dungeon is not Middle Son, but it is the rage within him (emphasis mine). He himself is one of the castle's occupants, in fact he and Daughter are its treasure, constantly under attack/in danger of being stolen (in this case, it's their self-worth which is at threat of being stolen), by enemies with bigger and bigger, inexhaustible weapons. The metaphor might be crude but there is certainly a large element of defensiveness, being under attack, not being left in peace, and being somewhat in need of protection.... The outside world seems to be afraid of the dragon, but at the same time, insistently upon getting at the treasure (which the dragon also guards)... on an individual scale pain is pain (Browne, Personal Correspondence, October 2006).

Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggested metaphor was central to human understanding (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1990). They argued that metaphor was an active conceptual framework that was central to how we understand the world. Thomas (1969) defined metaphor as a means of expressing one thing in terms of another. Basden (1999) reminded us that metaphors were valid, as long as it was remembered that such perspective was metaphorical and should never be taken to be the
overriding or the only valid way of seeing the situation, and if treating the situation then all the other aspects needed to be brought to bear on any and every decision that had to be made. With that backdrop I decided to approach my narrative through the use of metaphor.

Working with the metaphor provided by Browne above I began to think about metaphor generally and even contemplated using a developed metaphor as the wholistic analysis, but decided on the Stanza of Essence instead because it produced themes more readily and related to my central question of parental experience directly. I worked with the notion of metaphor and presented an elaborated metaphor based on Browne’s idea in Appendix 2. Although I had not brought the developed metaphor into the body of the paper, I believed that Browne’s words provided a critical insight; one that I was amazed that she saw in the narrative all the way from Calgary, the words emphasized above but it is the rage within him.

I was again reminded of Clark Blaise’s (1993) words:

This was the violation of everything I had lived with, everything I believed, everything I trusted.... Injustice I could live with. Indignity, never... (T)he books that signal the outbreak of revolution, that trigger murder and assassination, not from oppression, but from a moment’s inattention, the victim's casual assumption of the killer's lesser humanity. In books, people don't kill to avenge brutality; they avenge indignities. We can tolerate just about anything if we know in the final analysis we count for something, however slight... The motive for murder is not a criminal act, it's a small moral oversight (p. 107).

The vignettes which indicated rage in Middle Son were ‘What Lessons Can be Learned from a Christmas Concert?’ , ‘The Stool and Disneyland’, ‘Nicky, Nicky Nine
Door’, ‘Victim No More’, ‘We Leave Nothing Unresolved’. In many ways all of the action, the narrative, and the other themes produced a result and sadly that rage was precisely the result. I needed to acknowledge it and including it as a theme provided a means of doing so.

6.2.2.7 Silencing

The literature alluded to the silencing of parents. Herwig (1982) identified that parents saw teachers as critics of their parenting skills. Such a judgement could lead to silencing. Social judgement was particularly present and identified in the special needs literature. Leff and Walizer (1992) identified that parental emotions of vulnerability, guilt, and isolation led to nonparticipation. Green and Shinn (1995) identified that parents admitted that they did not play an active role because they were concerned about being found wanting or judged. Green and Shinn (1995) reported that one-third of parents with special needs children involved in their survey did not attend any school conferences because of feelings of inferiority and other emotions. Hornby (1995) stressed that school professionals should be mindful of parents’ feelings, presumably to keep parents communicating. Sileo and Prater (1998) researched barriers to parents’ involvement in their child’s special education. Their main finding was that parents were not involved if the school was not comfortable with them being involved. Other barriers included: English proficiency, being a member of minority race or culture, and the number of negative experiences that the parents had already had. Such barriers created the conditions for silencing or self-silencing. Smith (2001) listed barriers to parental participation in specifically the Individualized Educational Plan process as being: communication problems, lack of understanding of the school system, lack of knowledge
of their child’s disability, and feelings of inferiority. In summary, the special needs literature in particular indicated that many parents feared judgement and as a result did not participate and were silenced.

I felt silenced. Several times in the narrative I used the phrase “But I said nothing”. I did not speak when I should have. This was particularly true with regard to the dealings with Daughter. My own view and hers too to a certain degree was that I was so exhausted by the experiences with Middle Son that I had no energy left for her. Did I self-silence? Or was I silenced? I believe both.

Silence can be, or can seem to be, the result of personal choice, but silencing clearly involves choices made by other people as well as by the potential speaker. The action of silencing is accompanied by social and political judgements of what is acceptable and unacceptable. For this reason silencing offers the chance to see how discursive actions operate within the social field. Silencing can produce different forms within a community of discourse: unwanted silencing, complied-silencing, even unrealised or, as in the quotation above, self-imposed silencing. To begin to understand silencing, then, we must not only look at the imposition of one discourse on another, but also at the social and discursive boundaries among imposition, compliance, and self-silencing (Thiesmeyer, 2003, p. 12).

The essays within this volume, however, consider silencing as an act, whether single or repeated, of unequal negotiation that has larger personal, social and global consequences. It is an act that attempts to create or maintain a relationship in which the social value of the exchange is at least apparently or symbolically unequal (Thiesmeyer, 2003, pp. 13-14).

…Silencing, however, includes the act of (illocutionary) force on others behaviour and the reactions to that act among its targets. The action and reaction can occur because of the social frameworks enabling them, but they also impact in turn on these social frameworks, reinforcing, altering or resisting them (Thiesmeyer, 2003, p. 21).
The schools had their own frameworks of power and discourse. Both my children (at least Middle Son and Daughter) and I resided outside those frameworks. We were, to use the language above, unacceptable. We were judged and found to be wanting. The vignettes that included active Silencing are: ‘I Am the Teacher’, ‘Ambushed’, ‘Rolling in the Mud’, ‘Snow Pants and Lunches’, ‘What’s Wrong with this Picture?’, ‘Humiliation and Betrayal’, and ‘Seven Syllables’. I noted that the majority of these vignettes are about the activities of Daughter. And I returned to her question: “Why didn’t you tell them?”

I self-silenced too, even early on. As already discussed, I chose not to communicate which was a form of self-silencing. Women, Jack (1991) said, self-silence:

The invisibility of actions required to silence oneself helps explain why women’s outer compliance and seeming passivity have been systematically misinterpreted... (W)omen’s statements “I have learned ‘don’t rock the boat’…” and “I won’t cause waves, I won’t say anything” show conscious awareness of making themselves “look” passive for an intended effect: to keep outer harmony, to preserve the relationship (Jack, 1991, p. 129).

I saw more of myself in Jack’s analysis:

Forcing themselves to stop thinking, judging their own thoughts, and silencing their voices and opinions are methods by which women keep themselves from expressing anger and resentment (Jack, 1991, p. 137).

The vignettes in which I self-silenced were ‘A French Duck’, ‘The Pre-School Life of Middle Son’, ‘Snow Pants and Lunches’, any of the ‘Parent-Teacher Nightmares’, ‘Humiliation and Betrayal’, and ‘Seven Syllables’. Because it provides interpretation and
understanding of the narrative I provided Browne’s comments on the scene in the Doctor’s office in the ‘Pre-School Life of Middle Son’:

You would expect a visiting parent to prevent their child from doing something like this inside your home. Did you think by this point that this was acceptable behaviour, that it was unacceptable but uncontrollable, or something else? And if you say, "uncontrollable", can you recall how this boy developed through infancy to reach a point where you – an adult – could not control him? I think this is important. The point of these questions is not to say you were wrong. It is to try and identify some self-silencing behaviour which may have occurred on your part as a survival mechanism brought on by – by what – exhaustion, frustration – the dynamics of this are not for me to speculate on, but I think it is important if you are pursuing the "silencing" line. The boy learned that he could do things most children are not allowed to do without punishment. As a young man, I see a person who clearly knows his limits. So over the years there have been shifts. Maybe the part of the mother’s voice which she silenced for herself was the part that tried to fight the impulses she knew the boy simply could not control, no matter how much the boy might have wanted to please his mother. I think that shows a lot of wisdom on your part and I suspect you did it intuitively. I hope this makes sense (Browne, Personal Correspondence, October 2006).

I both was silenced and self-silenced. Far too many times I let things slide and I failed to advocate to the extent that I should have. I regretted this. I was especially sorry for the impact of my inaction on Daughter. Being silenced, whether imposed externally or by the self, meant I did not speak up when I should have, especially on behalf of Daughter. I hoped this discussion of Silencing added to the reader’s interpretation and understanding of the narrative and the phenomenon under study.

6.2.3 The Detailed Reading Approach

The detailed reading approach as described by van Manen (1990) required some thought about semantics or word selection. Reading Osgood et al., (1957, 1975), I
decided to focus on first descriptor words that were mainly adjectives and adverbs. I surveyed the narrative manually and started to underline adjectives and adverbs. I made a list of the most frequently occurring, (in David Letterman style, the Top Ten): next, same, good, little, particularly, wrong, right, new, happy, particular, and normal. I appreciated that that was 11 not 10 but there was an explanation. Further, following Osgood’s analysis of opposites I decided in my analysis to include opposites, right and wrong then became one pair and the list was back to 10. I, therefore, decided to look at the context and incidences in which I used the following 20 words: next-previous, same-different, good-bad, little-big, particularly-generally, wrong-right, new-old, happy-sad, particular-general, and normal-abnormal. The sentences in which each of these words appeared were provided in Appendix 3. (I note that Appendix 3 and 4 were produced before some grammatical and punctuation edits were made to the vignettes. Since they are data I have left them as they were when I did the analysis).

Before I created Appendix 3 with the help of Microsoft Word, I tentatively speculated what meaning I might have attributed to these descriptors.

### 6.2.3.1 Meaning of Descriptors

I speculated that so much use of next was probably related to the constant moving, next year for example. I thought of next as being of time and not position or place. I thought that my narrative may have a looking forward to next year, the next place and getting “the heck out of this place” quality to it. I was surprised to see same in the list. We were anything but the same, although I did think of it as a comparative word. I was also surprised to see good there as often as it was. Good was not something we
talked about much in our family. *Particularly* was expected. We thought of ourselves as unique and having unique experiences and so I was not surprised to see both *particular* and *particularly* high on the list. *Wrong* was definitely expected. I was *wrong* a lot, so were my children. *New* I expected would be very much like *next* and related to place in particular. This expectation was the same for the use of the word *old*. *Happy* was a bit of a surprise in that I did not recall describing a lot of *happy* circumstances. Finally *normal*, it was not something we were but I know I wrote about regretting its loss.

When I saw the list of words, what I described above were the meanings I was expecting I would find but for the most part those were not the meanings I found. I used *next* 36 times in relation to time, and the remaining 9 as references to place or position. I did not look forward, though, thinking about escape as I had contemplated, rather the use of *next* was most frequently just used in the ordering of days, the *next* day, the *next* morning, although there was one incident of “The *next* year things went from bad to worse.” The use of *previous* was also related to both time and place or position; both of these meanings were used equally. There was no particular pattern, though, of looking back with either regret or anger which was what I had thought I might find.

*Same* was used a total of 41 times as a descriptor, which was surprising to me since almost nothing about us was the *same*. We did not live in the *same* place and we were not people to be the *same* as others. *Same* was only used once though in the narrative to describe one of my children. “Wait a minute I thought was this the *same* child that the Scarborough therapists had described as pleasant, cooperative and willing” (from the vignette ‘Ambushed’). Mostly *same* was just used to describe objects. For
example, busses and schools were the most frequent objects described as the *same.* Interestingly, though, I did not use *different* even once to describe my children. I only used *different* twice to describe people; once in describing *differences* between two of Eldest Son’s playmates and once describing Mrs. Specialed as *different.* It was possible that I consciously chose to not describe my children as *different,* although I thought my not using either *same* or *different* as descriptors of my own children probably reconfirmed the conscious choice of Otherness as discussed in the previous section.

*Good* and *bad* were words I believed that parents and children lived with more than they probably should have. As I already mentioned, *good* was not talked about and to a certain extent *bad* was banished. *Good* was used in the narrative five times in relation to children; in all incidences it was used to describe their skills. Three times it related to Eldest Son and twice to Middle Son. I was proud that I did not slip into naming children as either *good* or *bad* but rather identified *good* as relating to skills. I used the description *good* in relation to three school personnel: Mr. Newcomer (a principal), Mr. Coincident (a counsellor), and Mrs. Minecaller (a vice principal). I needed to point out, however, that one of the incidences of *good* was actually no *good* as in “Mrs. Hibbits, your children are useless and no *good.*” *Bad* was used twice in the context of “*bad* to worse.” For the most part my use of *good* and *bad* contributed to the theme of Expectations and to the positive side of Professionalism.

*Little* was used 22 times and *big* was used 5 times. I was not surprised about *big* as I have already said in some ways I had consciously chosen to edit out *big,* sizeism, and weightism. As expected I mostly described other children as *little,* not mine: the *little*
blonde girls across the street, a little unilingual Anglophone girl in Eldest Son’s skating group, and Daughter’s playmate who was a little boy and son of my boys’ French teacher. This last one was a bit puzzling because although Daughter’s friend was like her, three and four years old at this time and, therefore, from that perspective was “little”, he was in fact “big” like her and that I am sure was one of the reasons they were friends. Little and big as I used them, contributed to the Otherness theme.

Particularly, meaning unusually, was expected in the narrative. What I did not expect was that in the 22 times I used particularly, it was used in the negative or at least in a negative sentence. Two examples were: “He was not particularly fussy” or “I had not noticed that he was particularly agitated over the lunch hour”. I wondered if these examples revealed a subtle claim to normalcy. We were not particularly so far off the beaten track after all. It might be my meaning. If that was so it would have contributed to the themes of Cultural Dissonance, Expectations, and Otherness as described above. Generally was used only once, which was appropriate I thought for a narrative in which the experience was unique.

Wrong was used 19 times. Three of these related to the wrong capitals. Wrong in a moral sense was used a total of seven times. Three times it related to me being in the wrong, once Middle Son being in the wrong, and three times Daughter wanting to tell the school system or teachers that they were wrong. Twice it was posed in a “right or wrong” pairing. My admitted-to wrongness in these incidences, ‘Snow Pants and Lunches’, ‘Seven Syllables’, and ‘Advanced Placement’ were all related to the theme of Silencing. Daughter’s “You are so wrong about me” was also a contributor to the theme of
Silencing. Interestingly, in the 19 times I used *right* it was rarely as the opposite of *wrong*. I used it as “immediately” or “correct” and once as in the opposite to “left”. My failure to identify *right* as a moral term contributed to the themes of Expectations and of Otherness.

*New* was used 18 times and *old*, 7. Almost half of the uses related to place. I noted that I did not identify *old* when it was used in the context “a six-year-old” for example, and only selected it as opposite to *new*. As it was primarily related to place, it speaks to the theme of Expectations, hope always around the corner and despair behind.

*Happy* was used 16 times in the narrative. *Sad* was used only once describing Rascal’s parents to Eldest Son. Eldest Son was described as *happy* five times, Middle Son four times and Daughter once. Daughter was described three times as not *happy* and Middle Son once. *Happy* was something that when you had a child, after you count their fingers and toes, that regardless of the circumstances you hoped they would be. Certainly in covering 19 years of schooling or 42 student years I thought that mentioning a *happy* child in a positive context only 10 times was evidence of the theme mentioned under the Expectations heading.

I had assumed the same for *particular* as I had *particularly*, that it was used to describe unique circumstances of a child or perhaps a teacher. Although I have not used the negative reversal as I had with *particularly*, I used it only one time each relating to each child and once relating to a teacher. The other uses, 9 in total, described either objects or circumstances. The opposite, *general*, did not reveal too much either, used only
as a descriptor, not relating to my children. The uses were so limited that I was not able to see these uses as adding to themes.

*Normal and abnormal* was the last pair of words. I did not use *abnormal* at all. *Normal* was used 11 times in the narrative. Primarily it was used in relation to what I was striving to be, but eventually could not be. Accepting Otherness, being Dissonant “not of we” and Silencing were all themes that were evidenced in the use of *normal*.

### 6.2.3.2 Meaning of Action

I thought that adverbs and adjectives would provide the most evidence of the themes in a detailed analysis, however it was through the exploration of the word “old” that I came to realize that looking at verbs would also be revealing. Because of the way Microsoft Word looked for things, each time it looked for “old” the verb “told” came up many times. In some cases it was I told, and in other cases it was I was told. I began to think about active and passive. I began to think about the theme of Communications related to telling and I began to think about empowerment and victimization. I wondered would active voice, me doing things, indicate empowerment and passive voice, or things being done to me, indicate victimization, the latter emphasising the theme of Silencing and the former perhaps keeping Expectations alive? I decided to limit the search for active and passive voice or action to strictly the conversations or interactions with the schools and I left the rest of the descriptive parts of the narrative out of this analysis. The incidences of school-parent interactions were provided in Appendix 4.

In total there were 58 incidences identified as moments of school-parent interactions. I abandoned my search strictly for active and passive voice mostly because
one could be passive in active voice, for example, “I listened.” But I noted the vignette entitled ‘Ambushed’ was the only vignette which was almost entirely in passive voice. It was listed as number 19 in Appendix 4. However, I analyzed the 58 quotations from the vignettes in Appendix 4 and attempted to identify whether my behaviour was passive or active. I was active and I did the pursuing in 17 of the incidences: (8, 12, 13, 16, 18, 31, 32, 33, 36, 39, 41, 49, 51, 52, 54, 57, and 58). I noted clustering of active periods, especially at the end. Did I finally figure it out? Maybe. Or maybe the last schools were more welcoming of a parent. For my part I had given up pride and shame and had become insistent and demanding. I noted the long gap in active behaviour from 19 to 30. Nineteen was the ‘Ambushed’ incident and it obviously took a long time for me to get my courage back after that incident. Of the 41 passive incidences, I noted that I took some action after receiving information in 14 of them (1, 5, 7, 10, 11, 17, 20, 23, 27, 28, 30, 43, 46, and 48). The remaining incidences were strictly information passing and no action was required of me. I noted, however, that I was silenced by incident 44 from the vignette ‘Humiliation and Betrayal’ and self-silenced in incidents 3, 24, 25, 35, and 55. This analysis of activeness or passiveness reinforced the theme of Communications. The schools did do a lot of talking to me and I did little talking back. Most often, I did as I was told. I was silenced and self-silenced which reinforced the theme of Silencing. Finally, especially near the end, I think I did keep hope alive and perhaps some of my lost Expectations re-emerged as I felt renewed strength to deal with my children’s schools.

6.3 Summary of Chapter Six

The purpose of this analysis was to provide axes or “knots”, to use van Manen’s word, along which interpretation and understanding could take place. The
wholistic analysis of the essence of the narrative identified themes. The themes were presented fully in the selected reading approach section. They were reinforced by the detailed analysis section. In other words it was possible to see the seven themes Communications, Cultural Dissonance, Expectations, Otherness, Professionalism, Rage, and Silencing throughout the narrative in a variety of ways. Communications for the most part was one-way communication where I was told and where I did not answer back. Cultural dissonance was the result of living in essentially alien cultures and as a result of a family A.D.D. culture that was not understood by the school system or individual teachers. Expectations were dashed and hope became despair. Otherness was created by me genetically, socially, and culturally and I have learned to accept responsibility for it. Teachers conceived of themselves as professionals and I deferred to that professionalism. Middle Son developed rage, the kind that never goes away. The identification of the rage in Middle Son was important in understanding the narrative. It was not my experience of schools per se but it was an important insight that must be acknowledged and I am grateful to Browne for having the perceptive skill of discovering it and then the courage to point it out to me. That moment of insight has helped me immensely in interpreting and understanding what happened and why I chose to write about it. His rage fuelled my outrage. Finally, I was silenced and I self-silenced. I was able to accept that the themes identified are feasible.
7.0 UNDERSTANDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSION

7.1 Outline of Chapter Seven

I ask the reader again to remember the two tracked nature of this journey.

Chapter Seven begins with recognition of the limitations of this study. The chapter provides a listing of the understandings that I have come to as a result of applying van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology, studying the literature, and analyzing the narrative. These understandings have implications for the practice of teaching, for parents, and for the structures and processes related to the educational enterprise. Chapter Seven provides an examination of these implications. Following this, a conclusion to this dissertation is provided as well as other concluding remarks.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

This study was a narrative of one parent’s experience with the school system. The interpretations and understandings applied to this narrative at this moment in time and, therefore, were not generalizable to all or even other cases of parental school experience. Rather it was hoped these interpretations and understandings provided insight into the parent experience of children’s schools that might also provide insight into other cases that had both similarities and differences. The limitation was that the study results, that is to say, the interpretations and understandings, were not generalizable, rather they were unique but transferable.
The purpose of human science research was to expose human experience. Narrative was one of the methods by which human experience could be exposed. Experience was exposed such that it could be interpreted and understood. The conclusion of this exercise was, then, not conclusions or recommendations but rather understandings. These were understandings I offered to readers, teachers, and parents.

7.3 General Understandings Based in the Personal

My understanding of the narrative has been enriched by the analysis and the interpretations provided in Chapter Six according to van Manen’s process. My understanding in the beginning as I lived it and when I wrote the narrative was that, and I know I am saying this more crudely than I should, the schools (meaning administrators, teachers and fellow students) picked on Middle Son and Daughter (and me?) because they were different. That outraged me. I did my best to defend my children when I could (when I had time, out there building a career instead of being a mother).

I now understood that in some ways this was the truth of life. Mr. Hyphenated Gym teacher and Seven Syllables were right. I did not know that then but I know it now. In part, me trying to fight it made it worse, worse for me, and most certainly worse for Middle Son and Daughter. The schools did not communicate with me and I reciprocated by not communicating back. Who did we think we were? Thinking we could fit into communities that had long cultural histories before and after we were sojourners there? How could I have gone into this having children thing thinking my kids would be normal? What was I doing thinking I should encourage marching to the beat of a different drum? Teachers were professionals who knew better. I allowed myself to be silenced and
silenced myself. With this understanding my challenge now is to snap back two or even three “20-something” nonconformists and try to help them be conformists, to fit into the world as it is, not as I hoped it would be. I have accepted the role I played. These were my personal understandings.

7.4 General Understandings Based in the Literature

As was indicated in the conclusion to Chapter Two the insight provided by Annette Lareau (1989, 1999) caused me to think more deeply about my experiences from the perspective of my own confused identity and the identity that I was given by those engaged in the education enterprise. This, coupled with the insights provided in the analysis section of Chapter Six, in particular the themes, led me to again review some of the literature that was provided in Chapter Two, this time with the benefit of Chapter Five and Six not only in my mind but in the reader’s mind.

There were some parts of the literature that I thought were true in the experiencing stage, that I thought were true in the analyzing stage, and that I still think are true. Epstein and Becker observed in 1982 that teachers reported that it was their view that the complexity of the parent-child relationship often interfered with the learning process. This was something that I said frequently during the course of Middle Son’s school career. The nightly conflicts around the kitchen table imposed on both of us because I was “forced” to sign a paper that said, to be honest I do not know what it said, but which I interpreted as saying, “I am a responsible parent and assume that my signature means that I have found a magic bullet that means that I can get him to do his school work when you cannot. My signature is my guarantee of this.” My relationship
with him almost guaranteed the exact opposite. It guaranteed that he would not do it ever.

He relied on me to save him, save him from humiliation by others, save him from loneliness, save him from taunting, and save him from the normalcy expectations of his father. If I could save him from this entirety, why did I turn against him, from his perspective, and not save him from homework? I offer the understanding that the observation of the teachers in this study concur with my experience.

Moles (1982) observed from the parent’s perspective that there were barriers to involvement. Parents had work demands that did not fit with the school’s schedule of events. He also observed that parents generally felt anxious in dealing with school staff. This latter feeling was produced because the school tended to only communicate when it was bad news. As already mentioned, in 42 pupil years of school I was only contacted twice when it was good news. Otherwise the hundreds of calls and notes I received were all bad news. I offer the understanding that my experience concurs with the observations of this study.

Comer (1986) observed that teachers had conceived of themselves as professionals and adopted the medical model whereby students were seen as bad or sick. Children were passed on to professional behaviour fixers. “Parents,” he observed, “of the children they treat are put on the defensive, and so the parent/school relationship is further complicated” (p. 444). Middle Son was certainly diagnosed as sick, not normal. He was passed onto professionals for treatment or conversion to normal. Certainly the ‘Rolling in the Mud’ vignette was a tale of being put on the defensive, and further
There are a few other studies that, for me at least, were confirmed in my narrative. Baker and Stevenson (1986) and Deslandes et al. (1997) found that frequent communications with teachers showed a negative relationship with school grades. As already commented, my lived experience aligned with this observation. In terms of special needs parents, Leff and Walizer (1992) identified that parental concerns seemed to have common threads: vulnerability, guilt, and isolation. This too aligned with my experience. Sileo and Prater (1998) noted that one of the reasons that parents were not involved with their children's schools was because of the number of negative experiences that the parents had already had. I offer the understanding that my experiences concur with the observations of these studies.

I now turn my attention to some of the studies that contributed to Lareau's analysis that the "disadvantaged" and the "at risk" were being given treatments that would turn them into involved middle-class parents, among them: Becher (1984); Dornbusch (1986); Gillum (1977) (cited in Henderson, 1981); Olmsted and Rubin (1982); Toomey (1986) (cited in Henderson, 1987); and Walberg, Bole, and Waxman (1980). Many of these studies involved some sort of training for parents that would presumably increase their involvement. With the exception of our parent training classes which were not offered by the school but by an external community agency (although recommended by the school) I cannot say that we were offered treatment of the sort that the parents in these studies were subjected to. However, I believed that the analysis of
these studies explained some of the interactions I had with my children’s schools. Because I had an A.D.D. child or in the case of Daughter an otherwise “defective” child, there was an assumption that I was “disadvantaged”, that he and/or she was/were “at risk”, that collectively we (me and Middle Son? The whole family?) were stupid. How else can the behaviour of ‘Ambushed’, ‘Snow Pants and Lunches’, and ‘A Broken Wrist’ be explained? It was not possible to treat someone this way unless there was an assumption of stupidity, disadvantage, and “at risk”. These studies of the disadvantaged, and about the “at risk” being healed by treatment, possibly resulted in the schools assuming that, without treatment, the disadvantaged and the “at risk” were not capable of being involved appropriately in their children’s schools. Consequently, this leads to the assumption that parents (I) needed guidance of the type offered to me in the vignettes mentioned above. Because I was not as stupid as the schools assumed, I found the treatment offensive and it caused me to have more negative interactions, quite possibly confirming for the schools that I was indeed stupid. I wondered again how many other disadvantaged/at risk families suffered the same fate.

But I am left confused by this, unsure of my understanding. Like many post-modern analyses I wondered if these observations did not lead to paralysis by analysis and everybody ended up doing nothing, except perhaps the conservative right who siloed and separated. I have accepted that Joyce Epstein (2001) had it right, that parents should be involved in their children’s school. I have not accepted that parents needed to be trained to be involved and that students needed to be converted. Surely the onus was on the schools and the professionals in them to make schools welcoming places for every
parent and every child regardless of language, race, culture, size, or disability. These are
my understandings based in the literature.

7.5 Specific Understandings Based in the Narrative

This section is addressed to teachers, principals, and other school
administrators.

Understand that the children who sit before you may not share your culture. It
may not be obvious to you but they may have fundamentally different beliefs about
everyday human events, even though they share your language, your skin colour, your
religion, and your sexual orientation. You must understand that these may be deeply held
convictions. The children are not wrong to believe different things. They are not deficient
and they do not need to be healed or corrected.

Understand that parents may not have available to them (especially if they live
in small isolated communities, or are poor, or for a million other reasons) the supplies
that you deem are required immediately. It causes a high level of anxiety for parents and
for the children. It is simply one more source of stress that is not needed.

Understand how difficult it is for any number of mothers to be involved in
their children’s school. I can give a couple of examples. A mother who has three children
4 and under is capable of doing little else besides mothering. If she does not volunteer it
is not because she does not care about what is going on at school. A mother who has a
professional career that requires extensive travelling that is not on a predetermined
schedule cannot volunteer for school and assume she will be reliable. Which is more
important, an arbitration in St. John’s in which someone’s livelihood is in question or serving hot dogs at the skating party? It’s a tough decision but I went to St. John’s.

Understand that many families may not have extended families around them and that going home for lunch or sudden changes in scheduling or other unexpected disruptions to routines may be a difficult and always stressful proposition. For many families the mother no longer stays at home but is in the workforce too. Yet it is my observation that schools seem to still be organized around the principle that mothers are at home and can drop everything in a heartbeat and arrive at the school door at a moment’s notice. (Eldest Son was lucky to have Ballou and Zellers!)

Understand that parents may not know what you are talking about. I gave the example of the strange religion scribbler and “en plastique” but “gym strip” was another word I did not know when I came to British Columbia. Jill Browne confirmed with me that she too had these problems, and her children attended the best private school in Calgary. She said it was worse with her older child, that there was a whole vocabulary that was unique to schools, and that she had it more figured out by the time her second child, her son, got there.

Understand what a child feels when he has been teased. Never allow teasing to go unchecked in a school. When a child has been teased and you arrange an apology, the apology should always be to the child, not the parent. You must build a school that fosters “angels” not teasers.
Understand that parents do have things to contribute: life lessons, stories, memories, special cookies. Welcome that participation, invite it, and make room for it, maybe by being less prescriptive: “Bring vegetables.”

Understand that both parent and teacher have a responsibility for the safety of this child. When you think he is coming back from lunch and he does not come back, no matter how rude the parent is by saying, “I sent you a note a week ago telling you he was going to the dentist today,” place the call immediately when he doesn’t come back. He may be just poking holes in snow banks somewhere but he may be injured or a candidate for AMBER Alert just as easily.

Understand that you can make mistakes, for example by saying the wrong child’s name when you call a student’s home or by accidentally teaching the wrong provincial capitals. It would be better to admit to the mistake rather than getting a year-long relationship off to a bad start because you try to blame the parent rather than taking responsibility for your mistake.

Understand that not every parent is likeable. A parent may come across as arrogant when she points out to you that you have taught the wrong provincial capitals but you must never be inclined to take your dislike of that parent out on innocent children. As a teacher you are privileged to work in a system where there are no checks and balances as there would be in ordinary workplaces, and you are in a pedagogical relationship with children, therefore, your behaviour must not be spiteful. It is the thing that parents fear most, “She will take it out on my child.”
Understand that you need to explain administrative policies and practices to all parents. A parent should never be ambushed. The purpose of the meeting should be explained. Who will be at the meeting should be explained and what role each person will play should be explained. The parent’s rights should be explained. A parent should always be allowed to speak first at a meeting that is being held about her child. A parent should be allowed to speak last, too. A parent should not be purposefully subtly intimidated by the seating arrangement. A parent should always hear something positive about her child, anything, not just a litany of negatives. Understand the impact that such a meeting can have on the parent and through her, the child. Knowing what I know now, I would not go into a meeting like this again without an advocate or a witness at least, and most likely legal counsel.

Understand the impact that the presence of an A.D.D. child can have on a whole family. They are sure to be isolated. Screecher’s mother told me for example (and we are still friends) when Middle Son was around three that, “I don’t want Middle Son in my yard.” They are sure to have figured out what the nature of their relationships with each other can be, given the circumstances under which they live. Daughter and Eldest Son knew they would never get the first hot dog and they would never sit in the front seat. Understand the family’s special unique situation. Be prepared for it not to look rational or right from your perspective, but they know what survival looks like. Listen and learn; don’t assume. You have no idea how hard it is.

Understand the destruction that can be caused by uttering the words, “We wonder if there is any discipline in this home at all.”
Understand that no matter how "useless and no good" you think a particular parent’s child is at a parent-teacher night you need to find at least one, however tiny and irrelevant you may think it is, positive thing to say about every child. Actually it needs to be more than that. You need to have one positive thing to say to every child. Just like Angelo Italiano’s kindness felt like a miracle to Middle Son, kind words from a teacher felt like a miracle to Daughter and she was in grade ten! I have not told about this incident in the narrative because it was not a case of parent-school interaction but I think it will help make the point here. We moved to suburban Vancouver in September. Within the first month the Terry Fox Run was held. Daughter’s gym class ran. She could not keep up and trailed behind. She eventually lost sight of the pack and since she was new to the neighbourhood she did not know how to get back to the school. She ran, and she ran, and she ran. By the time she got back to the school she was crying. Although the gym teacher and the school were celebrating the winners, the first returnees, the gym teacher took Daughter aside and told her she would receive a grade of 5 out of 5 for the run because she had put such an effort into it. Daughter was stunned. It was the first time that a teacher had ever rewarded her for the effort she put in. It was the first time in her school life that she was able to connect effort and the grade she received and it felt like a miracle.

Understand that because you do not like a parent that it does not then give you the right to use a sibling as a go-between. Think about what the dynamics in that family

27 Terry Fox (1958-1981) was a Canadian athlete whose transcontinental run helped raise more than $24 million for cancer research, making him a national hero. Fox undertook the run, dubbed the Marathon of Hope, after losing much of his right leg to cancer. He reached near Thunder Bay, Ontario and had to stop the run because the cancer had returned. He died a few months later. Since his death, Terry Fox Runs have been held annually in Canada, the United States, and many other countries. These runs have continued to raise money for cancer research (Scrivener, 2000).
might already be. There are other reasons for a mother not putting snow pants on a child in a snowy climate where the temperature is -30 °C for weeks on end other than that the mother is stupid. It might be that the child does not find them comfortable. It might be that the mother does put them on but the child takes them off. It might be that this child is big and round and that no matter how hard you look in stores you will not find a pair of snow pants that he will deem comfortable. Maybe if you talked to the mother you would find she is in fact not stupid. I wonder why she does not talk to you? Maybe she has been so hurt by things that this school has said and done that she cannot face coming to the school. Maybe you should reach out.

Understand that when a child has been hurt at school, including a relatively minor broken wrist, that no conversation has any meaning until the parent sees the child with her own eyes.

Understand that when a parent contacts a new school or a new school board that she expects that she is being listened to. Understand that moving for a family with three school-aged children, no matter how many times they have done it, is stressful business. Understand that in Canada, at least, there are different customs and traditions around education in every province. Don’t assume that people from another province understand your cultures and traditions. Explain them.

Understand that a parent who has never been exposed to it does not know what an Individualized Education Plan is. Explain the process thoroughly. Explain the
parent’s rights. Explain the advantages and potential disadvantages. Allow the parent to think about it. Don’t pressure. Have a plan B if the parent doesn’t go for it.

Understand that you have a responsibility to teach children about their responsibility in world peace and it begins at the bus stop. Although it was not at this moment in my children’s school life or perhaps it was, I don’t know, I have wondered from time to time in whose classroom the young men who sat behind us at the Canucks game on December 23, 2005 (‘Anson and Jarome’, Appendix 1) were sitting a few years earlier. They were in their early twenties so they had been in someone’s classroom. In whose classroom did they learn to degrade women? In whose classroom did they learn to reference people’s race? How did this happen?

Understand that if you are from a different culture, that children would consider themselves privileged to hear about it. Let different cultures shine.

Understand that if you are going to discuss teachers’ union politics in class that you may have children in your class who see things from a very different perspective. When they are young you will frighten them; when they are older I hope they will challenge you. Consider what might be the lived experience and the frame of reference for children before you introduce such topics in the classroom. Don’t assume that there is universal acceptance that the union movement is benevolent and respected.

Understand that any child, even Middle Son, is more important than a flawless Christmas concert. You must not cause the birth of rage. You have no right.
Understand that there is never an occasion when it is okay to have students choose sides. One child will always be last. Think what it feels like to be that child. Line people up by height, alphabetically, draw randomly. If you cannot think of a way call me and I will come and do it for you.

Understand that there is never an occasion when it is okay for a teacher to mock a child in front of other students. I repeat, as a teacher you are privileged to work in a system where there are no checks and balances as there would be in ordinary workplaces, and you are in a pedagogical relationship with children, therefore, your behaviour must not be harmful.

Understand that even though this child may be leaving this school, when you receive puzzling test results you need to understand them. Did no teacher ever notice that one of the reasons that Daughter could not print tidily was because she was forming letters from the bottom and not the top? Did no one ever notice this? Sadly, I admit that I did not notice it either until she was a university student. But there were professionals around her all the time, surely someone saw this.

Understand what it is like to be Other, to be teased and teased and teased some more. You must stop it in schools. I say it again; you must build schools that foster “angels” not teasers. The fact that you personally have been called names too does not help a student who is tortured as a result of the act of going to school.

Understand what it is like for a parent to hear a barrage of negative comments about a child whom she knows is not negative. Ask the parent what she thinks about the
information you are providing. Do not silence her by humiliating her. Say one good thing about every child if you hope to communicate with parents at all.

Understand that if you ask a parent to choose between her child’s happiness and his academics she will chose his happiness. As a parent, there is no choice.

Understand what it is like to be an A.D.D. child in a classroom, a school, or a life. Middle Son has told you, remember always, “I am a Penguin. I might not Fly in the Sky, but I can Fly in the Ocean.”

Understand that every child cannot run the track. Imagine yourself in that child’s shoes.

Understand that you have a responsibility to oversee even student-run projects. You are the adult in charge.

Understand the responsibility to maintain school property. The chance that is lost may be the chance of a lifetime.

Understand that every child is unique and may express himself differently artistically than you would. It does not mean that he is not an artist and it does not give you the right to snatch away his artistic soul.

These are my understandings based in the narrative.
7.6 Implications for Practice

I do not have a privileged insider view of the practice of teaching. I only know what I experienced as a parent. I know that like the rest of us, teachers react to circumstances, changes, and people based on, among other things, their emotions (Lasky, 2000; Schmidt, 2000; Schmidt and Datnow, 2005). Teachers are on the one hand trained professionals, and on the other hand subject to the same full range of emotions all people experience. If a teacher was once again faced with a parent like me, with children like mine what could be done differently? This would be the true value of my narrative; that it would supply 48 case studies that could be discussed *ad infinitum* by teachers and education students. Teachers should be aware of the difficulty that a family faces when there is an A.D.D. child present. They should be aware that the family feels guilt, shame, and easily (because they are dealing themselves with challenging behaviour 24-7) becomes isolated. Parents need to hear something, *anything*, positive about their child. Each school year for the parent is a new year of trying to explain to a new teacher about *this* particular child. And each new year brings never-ending tears of frustration probably experienced by all participants in the school dance including the teacher, certainly the child, and the parent. This is what I know as a parent and am able to share with teachers and they can decide what the implications for their profession are.

But I need again to return to the two tracked journey, the personal and private above, and now the intellectual and the public. In some ways the journey has become despair in the private and, by inference, then hope in the public. I return to the words of van Manen (1986):
This experience of hope distinguishes a pedagogic life from a non-pedagogic one. It also makes clear that we can only hope for children we truly love, in a pedagogic sense. What hope gives us is this simple confirmation: "I will not give up on you. I know you can make a life for yourself." Hope refers to all that gives us patience, tolerance and belief in the possibilities for our children. Hope is our experience of the child's possibilities. It is our experience of confidence that a child will show us how life is to be lived, no matter how many disappointments we may have experienced. Thus hope gives us pedagogy. Or is it pedagogy that gives us hope? (van Manen, 1986, p. 27).

And then Freire:

One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, without hope there is little we can do. For hope is an ontological need...The attempt to do without hope in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion (Freire, 1998 cited in Williams, 2009, p.1).

For the intellectual, the public, I actively look for hope. It is true that there is much research out there that is cause for hope for the practice of teaching. Joyce Epstein (2001) has contributed much in terms of how parents should relate to schools. There is the Lareau (1989) objection (converting everyone to middle-class may not be in everyone’s best interest) but knowing and understanding the implications of that objection is hopeful too. Darling-Hammond (1997), Noddings (2003), and Schön (2000) offer hope too. In school reform there is hope; in the caring movement there is hope; and in the reflective practice movement there is hope. I see hope too in van Manen’s (1986, 1991) insistence upon the understanding of pedagogical intent. I see great hope in the
practice of teaching as it is described by Neumeier (2004), Palmer (1998), and Sinclaire (1994). And so the implication for practice from my study is hope.

I mentioned this struggle, that is, trying to end hopefully in the implications for practice section to Middle Son and Daughter and they were upset. Daughter said, “Mom you are letting yourself be silenced again by the teachers’ dominant discourse.” They at least do not see hope. They remember too profoundly their experiences. Despite this, in them I see hope too. Yesterday (February 9, 2009) in her last semester in university Daughter came home with her first “A”. Middle Son is studying Education. He is studying Education because he feels a sense of responsibility to not let what happened to him happen at school to another child. Perhaps there is hope in his mission too. But you know what, teachers, it is not his responsibility. It is yours.

In an attempt to bring private and public together I end this section on implications for the practice of teaching with the words from a sign that is in my front hall, beside my front door (the place where private and public meet):

...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...(Romans 5:3-5).

The practice of teaching must be about hope.

7.7 Implications for Structural Change

Is there something fundamental about the way in which schools are structurally organized that could cause the kind of dissonance I experienced? There are many aspects to the structure. There is the provincial government, there are school
boards, there are schools with principals and teachers who are in unions, and then there are children with parents. I am a Lockean (Locke, 1988) so believe that the provincial government has a legitimate role and speaks for the people. If the people do not like how they are speaking then they will be voted out at the ballot box (and that is fundamentally how Lockean democracies such as Canada work). I say this because I will not be arguing for a different role for the provincial government. As far as I am concerned they take on their role legitimately. Others may see it differently but I do not. School boards, like the provincial government, also take on their roles legitimately through Lockean processes. It then comes to the school level. I believe that schools can do many things to make themselves open to hearing from parents. There is extensive literature on this, amongst it: Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005); Deal and Peterson (1999); Fullan (2003, 2007, 2008); MacBeath and Mortimore (2001); and Sergiovanni (1991, 2002). Schools should be more welcoming. Parent-teacher nights should be re-thought. For the most part parents now work; maybe convenient scheduling would make parent-teacher nights more effective. I know my children believe that parent-teacher nights should always include the student, regardless of the age. But these are not fundamental structural changes; they are just following the advice of any of the above and of course, Joyce Epstein (2001).

I do not, however, believe that Parent Advisory Councils are the appropriate structural solution to these problems. Parents like me, because we are too ashamed, will not participate. Further, what is true is that the other 20 or so parents who will participate will not want parents of problem children in the fold. The truth of the matter is that neither teachers nor other parents want children like Daughter or Middle Son in their class or their child's class. I know this in particular from Daughter's third last school.
There was a PAC, for which I was never once asked to participate. I do not know if there is a structural solution, maybe a parents’ ombudsperson, but it is likely to have little impact as long as the dual yet contradictory “cones of silence” of unionism and professionalism remain in place.

I am impressed by Noddings and Schön and others thinking of a different kind of teaching practice than the one I, for the most part, experienced, or even Madelaine Grumet’s 1988 call for a different kind of curriculum that gets at the foundational issues between parents and schools. In the end I suspect they might work and provide a better experience for normal students and maybe even English as a Second Language students or the culturally diverse, but they will not work for A.D.D., sized, weighted Others. It is culturally engrained that we are less and there is no movement afoot to encourage change. In fact if you go to the Ministry of Education “Act Now B.C.” website (I remind you, the legitimately elected representative of the people) you will get a sense of the next attack on the sized, and the “Achieve B.C.” section gives a sense of the next attack on A.D.D. children. Accountability, what I called the accountability of the public space, not the kind you test for and measure, is at the crux of the problem, but difficult if not impossible to get at given current societal values. The world is as it is.

The other structural aspect that bears some comment is the duality of unionism and professionalism, referred to as the cones of silence above, within the teaching profession. Teachers are alone amongst the professions with this dual designation. All other professionals—lawyers, accountants, doctors, engineers—have requirements for reporting a member’s malpractice to the governing body. Because of
unionism this requirement does not exist in the teaching profession. There is, therefore, no professional accountability, as it is thought of in the other professions, in the teaching profession. The other structural aspect of this that my narrative raises is what place an amateur parent has in raising issues to a professional teacher. I do not give my doctor advice on treatment of my gallstones; I do not give my lawyer advice on the handling of my house sale; I do not tell an engineer how to build a bridge; and I do not give my accountant advice on completing my tax appeal. Although, in some of these cases I might provide relevant information, as I would to a teacher about my child. The expectation of both the parent and the professional teacher is that the teacher is the professional and has the specialized knowledge to do the right thing by my child or any child. But if they do the wrong thing, because of the duality of professionalism and unionism, there is no accountability mechanism. It is one of the issues my narrative raises, but also it is one for which I see no solution. Again, the world is as it is.

In the end I suspect solving the problems raised by my narrative will simply not occur. The next Middle Son and Daughter will simply have to, as my children did, rely on the humanity of a few teachers.

7.8 Implications for Parents

No matter what, despite pride, fear, embarrassment, perceived lack of ability or knowledge, put these feelings aside and fight for your child. You are the only one who will. You must not allow the development of rage and you can only prevent it if you intervene and intervene and intervene some more. I have thought a lot about parents out there who have significantly more challenges then I (Down Syndrome and Autism to
name but two). I would like to reach out to them, but they too must fight against tremendous pressures and odds.

### 7.9 Recommendations for Further Study Using My Narrative

I have thought of a number of different studies that would have, as a foundation, my narrative. There are perhaps 8 to 10 women who have shared the Canadian mining journey with me, most with histories of moves and school changes that mimic mine. I was thinking that I would like to call them together and have them in isolation read my narrative and then invite them to discuss it, to provide interpretation and understanding. I would hope they would then be able to write their own stories. Was my experience unique because of the presence of A.D.D.? Are there parts of the narrative that exist for more nomads? I think interpretation and understanding could be enhanced by this further study.

I have thought a lot about Mrs. Specialed, Mrs. Masters, Mr. Hockey, Mr. Newcomer, and Mr. Coincident, the life lines. I know that three of the five are now retired. I could conceivably track them all down. How would they react to my narrative? Could they tell me what they saw in Middle Son that made them want to help him instead of hurt him?

Although there have been a few studies (e.g. Bray and Thomson, 1992) on the impact of the practices of the Canadian mining industry on families, I think my narrative and perhaps the first mining mothers idea above would provide some more information. It might also be of interest to other nomadic industries too: the RCMP, the military,
certain management levels in the banking industry, for example. What is the real human cost of these practices?

7.10 Recommendations for Further Study

My narrative raises a number of interesting questions that could be researched by others. The biggest of these, at least from my perspective, is the cone of silence, the coexistence of unionization and the teaching so-called profession. I searched the ERIC data base using the string of “professionalism and unionization” and a total of seven entries came up. For the most part it has been researched and defended by teachers’ unions themselves, a bit of the fox in the hen house. Yet, as I have told my dissertation topic to colleagues and friends, without exception the issue of “I say nothing to my child’s school because I fear that the teacher will retaliate on my child” has come up, most recently amongst 18 senior university administrators who were meeting at the University of Saskatchewan, folks I would not have picked as shrinking violets. Yet there was free admission amongst those colleagues that the best thing you can do in that situation is hope your child gets a better teacher next year. I conclude then that I am not the only one who was and is frustrated by the lack of accountability in the employment relationship of teachers. The articles that did show up on the ERIC data base include Straut (1996) and Sachs (1999). Both defended, neither critically evaluated the issue as I have constructed it. On an Internet search not limited to legitimate peer-reviewed articles I did come across an article by Stern (1997). It was an anti-union piece but did not particularly address the issue of professional accountability in a system of unionization. It is time for independent researchers, not those in quid pro quo arrangements to take this topic on.
My narrative, looking through Annette Lareau's lens, raised issues around the portability of one-size-fits-all solutions. There was Lareau’s perspective that it was not appropriate to try to convert the “disadvantaged” and the “at risk” to good middle-class citizens by “training” them in the techniques of the middle class, but there was also the reverse. Techniques that were researched on the “at risk” and the “disadvantaged” may not be transferable to other settings either. Many teachers will tell you that they have encountered a whole set of unpleasant parents that includes professionals (lawyers, professors, and others). Instead of just accepting this is so, perhaps this is an area of required research, that is, the applicability or not of one-size-fits-all research solutions. Upper class and middle-class parents have often solved problems of school experience by putting their children in private schools. Perhaps this would be an appropriate data source: Why did you take your children out of public school? The answer might go beyond parents being difficult for the sake of being difficult.

My narrative raised the difficult issue of sizeism and the accepted discrimination that people of size suffer. It is a prejudice that is acceptable and is reinforced in everyday choices that people make about language, what they find funny, whom they see as inferior. From my perspective there are two choices for the research here, scientific research that will make everyone thin, or research that attempts to understand the damage that is done to the spirits and souls of children like Middle Son by the relentless assault. I can tell you this much, blaming him or telling him not to get angry is not the answer. I suspect prison may well be the best source of interview subjects. It is rage that never goes away.
Another area of research that my narrative raised is the issue of the unique culture of families with A.D.D. or other special children. Joseph Heller’s novel *Something Happened* provided one view of the stress, my narrative another. Is there a special culture that such families live under that makes them different and perhaps not understandable to others? Perhaps understanding this culture would result in more humane treatment of such families.

As already mentioned, more research is need on the impacts of uprooting families for economic purposes.

### 7.11 Conclusion

I have come to understand that my children’s lives at school and my experience of their schools were somehow the perfect storm. Of what? I do not know. The roots began with me and probably my husband too. We were both children of relatively poor families. We were both the first in our collective extended families to attend university so we were not typical middle-class parents. We were constantly (and I see this from looking back and was not aware of it at the time) overly concerned with doing the right thing. No, that is wrong we were not overly concerned with doing the right thing, we were overly concerned with doing things right. We deferred when we should have challenged. We deferred because we ourselves both had parents that respected and deferred to authority. This was further exaggerated because of the constant moving we did. We never got comfortable enough with any environment to truly rise up and challenge. When we were almost there, at the point of saying enough is enough, we moved.
Middle Son, if born to different parents at a different time might not have been labelled as he was. As one of my dissertation advisers observed, generally middle-class parents avoid having their children labelled because they know how to work the system. I did not know how and so he was labelled. If he had been born in my mother’s time she would have thought him a rascal and in many ways life would have gone on. When we lived amongst the Cree in Quebec many of the Cree women I worked with urged me to send Middle Son (and he was three and four years old at the time) out in the bush with the Elders. They assured me that he would be happy there. Many times when I was in a store in Quebec, various of the Cree people, some whom I knew and some whom I did not know that well, would come up to me and ask me if they could buy something for Middle Son. He had very blonde hair then and a big broad face. The Cree children would try to lift him up and hug him. They saw something that we could not. I wonder what life would have been like for Middle Son if he had been born amongst the Cree. Middle Son recently, at age 24, travelled to China. On several occasions there people came up to him and asked if they could have their photograph taken with him. They too saw something we do not.

What if Daughter had not followed Middle Son? What if I had had all the energy left in the world for her and had fought for her every step of the way the way I should have; she would almost certainly not have been labelled. The amazing thing about both Middle Son and Daughter was that they were almost born reading. They both read before they finished kindergarten. They read well beyond their grade level their whole lives and remain avid readers to this day. That should have said something about who they are.
The issue of size is another one. What if they had been normal-sized cute children? The events in this narrative almost certainly would not have happened. Lareau’s analysis has let me see this in a way that I have not seen it before. I was disadvantaged. My children were at risk. And so this was the perfect storm: deferential parents, constant moving, abnormally sized children, labels, exhaustion, and eventually and sadly the birth of the dragon-dinosaur named rage.

There is really only one conclusion here. This study sought to identify as a phenomenon the experience of a parent interacting with her children’s schools. It does that but, unfortunately, this was not the parent-school interaction that Joyce Epstein had in mind; something went terribly wrong. It went wrong because there were difficult communications, based mostly in telling and rarely in listening. It went wrong because we were not of the communities in which we lived. Economic necessity and the manner in which a whole industry conducts itself were far beyond our individual family’s control. It went wrong because I expected that my children would be “normal” and would therefore be treated with dignity and respect. They were not “normal” though and were therefore harmed. It went wrong because I taught my children to be Other, because I defined myself that way and encouraged Otherness in them. It went wrong because I deferred to professional opinions. It went wrong because Middle Son developed deeply held personal rage. Once that happened the family dynamic became protective, protecting the world from that rage. It went wrong because I allowed myself to be silenced and I silenced myself. Perhaps it went wrong because parents (mothers in particular) and teachers as Lightfoot (1979) and Grumet (1988) both point out are to a certain extent
natural enemies. For the most part, the “it went wrong” must be laid at my feet. I accept that. But that is not to say that others or the system cannot learn from this experience.

7.12 Unfinished Business

Dear Daughter:

Sometimes I tried. I tried in Nicky Nicky Nine Door and in Seven Syllables. But you are right for the most part I either didn’t try or I failed. I didn’t try because I let myself be silenced by my own pride. I was exhausted after so many mostly unsuccessful interventions on behalf of Middle Son that what you think is true; I had no energy left for you. I failed because I was deferential to those whom, looking back, I probably should not have been deferential too. For this I am truly sorry.

Love Mom

Dear Middle Son:

You must banish the dragon-dinosaur called rage. While it is true that others put him there (me, your father, teachers, principals, and classmates) you are the only one who can banish him. Although you may mistakenly believe that he gives you strength and power, the fact is that you would be much stronger and more powerful without him.

Love Mom

Dear Eldest Son:

You must find again within you that little boy that on that first warm spring day in Quebec spent two and half hours poking holes in snow banks. You don’t need the house with an ocean view or the Mercedes or the BMW. You need to find him. I am so proud of who you are and you don’t need to prove anything to anybody.

Love Mom
7.13 The Last Word

I am exhausted now. There is nothing more to say. I take responsibility for what went wrong. However, there is no easy way of fixing from a system perspective what went wrong. But because I am no longer able to speak, I thought I would end on a note of optimism and give the last word to my sister-in-law Jill Browne, who so many times has spoken for me during this, revealing when I could not:

Maybe I am wrong but in any case, I do not believe you accepted that verdict at face value. You have always seen the good and the potential in your children. You have been their fearless and reliable advocate all along. Somewhere in the story there must come a point when social pressure and teacher’s opinions ceased to make you feel bad. I do not believe you were one of those mothers who lives in denial, but to accept what the teachers said would have completely destroyed you and the relationship with your kids. I accept that it was insulting, hurtful, demoralizing, depressing, all of those things, but I do not think you ever believed that it was true. Otherwise you would have just stopped trying, you would have made the kids believe they were useless, and everything would have ground to a halt. I think some of the weapons you successfully employed to deal with much of this crap were humour and irony. Particularly with Daughter, but all 3 of them have a great grasp of the ironic (Browne, personal correspondence, October 15, 2006).

And so in a two tracked dissertation that juxtaposes hope and despair the last word is ironic.
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APPENDIX ONE

A.1.1  My Role Models for Parental Behaviour

A.1.1.1  When Victoria Was Queen: The Brought Self, The Stock of Knowledge

But she wasn’t actually; when my father went to school, George V was already King. My father was born in 1909 so presumably started school in either 1915 or 1916. However, he always talked about a large portrait, in an embossed frame, out of place in the barnboard-burlap sack-root cellar world in which he and his classmates resided, of Queen Victoria adorning the front of the classroom. He attended the one-room schoolhouse that was on the corner of his and what would eventually be my family’s farm in Vaughan Township in Ontario. In my father’s day there were fewer than 10 families that sent their children to the grade one to grade eight schoolhouse for a total of 25 students in fat years and as few as 15 in lean years. That is the way my sisters found the school in the early 1950s, the same school building my father had attended, eventually torn down and replaced with a new one-room schoolhouse the year before I started school. But there is one thing that was certain when my father was in school, and that was how his parents experienced school.

His father was a trustee. He would have known the other trustees (probably was related to most of them) since they were boys themselves at the school. The trustees engaged the teacher. In most cases too it was likely they knew the teacher since she was a pupil in either their school or a neighbouring one. I know, for example, that Mary McGill, a local girl, was a teacher at this school. (However, I seem to remember a school photograph and that she was a classmate of my mother’s and went to my mother’s and not my father’s school as a pupil.) School was community-driven and hands-on, at least in terms of governance. The parents supplied the wood and later coal for the school stove in winter, and took turns too providing potatoes that were baked at lunch time on the stove. A visit to the now City of Vaughan website says:
From the early 1800's to the 1960's, most schools in Vaughan were cramped one or two-room affairs, where strict discipline and moral instruction were the orders of the day. By 1885 there were 21 schools in the community, each with its own elected Board of Trustees responsible for administering the business of their school. At this time, male teachers were paid $425 a year, with female teachers earning $265. Most students received a typically rudimentary education, with the realities of rural life necessitating that the needs of the farm took precedence over those of the scholar. In 1960, the Vaughan Township Public School Board replaced individual school boards. Schools then came to be administered by the York County Board of Education, and then the Region of York in 1971.


There was little dispute either as to what the purpose of education was. The three “R’s” were the order of the day. My father, a farmer his whole life, always measured distance in rods and volume in bushels. The Trustees (men) ran the school. The teacher (mostly women, for economic reasons if no other) was engaged by them. The students were homogeneous from the point of view of ethnicity, religion, and for the most part, socioeconomic class. My father would often tell a tale that they were united too in politics. When a Tory bought a farm on what was a Grit concession road, a public meeting was held to determine whether or not this should be permitted. (To their credit they decided to allow this diversity.) Another story my father favoured telling concerned the female teacher who through choosing prizes for the school picnic, committed a faux pas and had a complaint issued against her to the Trustees by a leading citizen. She had chosen as prizes bars of soap and it so happened that two bars of soap were won by two children of the same family whose mother took great exception to the prize. “She’s saying my children are dirty” was the complaint. (I think here of the various misunderstandings and miscommunications with the schools in my narrative and think of the applicability, or lack thereof, of the thin skull principle29 in law.) It is my hypothesis

29 A long standing principle of law, known as the “thin skull” rule “you take the victim as you find him”. This principle makes the defendant liable for the plaintiff’s injuries even if the injuries are unexpectedly severe for that individual, owing to a pre-existing condition. For a discussion see: Brudner, A. (1998). Owing outcomes: on intervening causes, thin skulls, and fault-undifferentiated crimes, The Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence, 11, 89-114.
that as the generations passed, perhaps around the 1960s as mentioned in the Vaughan posting, the parents’ ability and perhaps desire to be involved in their children’s schools got lost in the centralization of school boards, in the directing of curriculum from Ministry of Education offices, in the university education of teachers, and in the unionization of teachers, in short in modernization and urbanization. It went from my grandfather’s hands steadily on governance to my hands adrift, unwelcomed, and idle all at the same time.

I am, however, doubtful that my grandfather was involved in the school beyond governance. My father, who was a person of story never mentioned it, so I am pretty confident it did not happen. As for my parents’ school involvement, I do not ever remember a single incidence of my parents even entering the school building. They did attend Christmas concerts and school picnics but these were not held in the school, the former in a community hall and the latter in a park with an outdoor swimming pool with chlorine. (I was taught to swim, unsuccessfully, in the creek.) They had five children, all of whom attended for at least six years each at a schoolhouse that was located in the corner of one of our pastures (we had a real zoology lesson one day when one of our cows calved right in front of the classroom window) and they never once entered the school building. For the most part we were well-behaved and good students. They had no need to go to the school.

Only once can I remember the school ever contacting my parents about behavioural issues that resulted in an incident of parent experiencing school. It was in the run-up to school consolidation, in the second last year that the school in the pasture operated. My two younger brothers would have been in grade five and grade six. The three one-room country schools that were about to be consolidated with a large village school were still operating but they had each been allocated two grades to teach as construction went on at the village school. Grade five and six were at “our” school. For whatever reason that year, there were far more boys in the school than girls. Perhaps 18 of the 25 students were boys. They could be from time to time somewhat rambunctious. In addition, the teacher that year was in the last year of her teaching career and was not known for either kindness or patience. She was known, however, for driving a 1959
Royal Blue Chevrolet Impala convertible. The boys, my brothers and their friends, used to go to school early, before the teacher got there. One morning they got up on the school roof and one of them accidentally (?) kicked a window in. (The school design had a row of windows on the top of the wall that functioned somewhat like a skylight, although that terminology would not have been used at the time.) The teacher, as she was parking her car in the porch (which was meant to provide cover for the children in the rain but which she used as a carport to keep her most prized possession near and dry) also noticed on her way in that someone had whacked a broom against a post that was part of the structure of the porch. (One can only imagine the fear that struck in her heart. What if they did that when the Impala was present?) For whatever reason, she blamed the elder of my two brothers (my brother’s view, revenge of a most likely female snitch) for the broom infraction. My younger brother (although I do not think it was actually he who kicked the window in) confessed after some coercion to throwing a pine cone through the window. (He reasoned there would be really big trouble if she knew they’d been up on the roof, so he fabricated a more palatable reason for the broken window.) She screamed at him. (My brother almost certainly had never been screamed at in his whole life. Neither of my parents were screamers.) “I’ll pine cone you!” she shouted and she promptly called my house. She spoke to my father. She told my father that both my brothers were “ill behaved handfuls” and that they should receive some sort of punishment at home. (My suspicion is that she did not want to punish at school in fear of retaliation against the Impala, egged at Halloween in any event.) My father told her he would talk to them and take care of it. When my brothers got home my father did talk to them. They told him the truth of the events as related above. He knew his sons well and trusted them. He told them to be careful at school (presumably they understood that being careful meant not getting up on the roof) as she (the teacher) had it in for them and was a bit of a “nutty fruit cake”. “Look out for her,” he told them.

That I believe was the total extent of my parent’s experience of school at the one room schoolhouse in 32 pupil years. My mother did supervise homework though and I can remember her helping me study explorers in Social Studies in about grade four or five. I also remember her reading a book that I had taken out of the public library that I thought thoroughly justified the purchase of a pony/horse for me. She saw it differently.
and discussed with me the merits of her interpretation versus mine. (I remained
horseless.) Pre-spelling test review was also part of our family routine, in later years “kid
on kid” rather than parental participation per se. In my parents’ defence I think their lack
of involvement came from a few sources. My father had a grade eight education, my
mother, grade seven. They did not have a lot of self-confidence in challenging the
opinion and authority of someone who had been to Normal School, the term used at the
time for Teachers’ College. We were good students and polite well-behaved children,
particularly my brothers and sisters who are all shy people by nature. I was a little more
challenging but not so much that I was big trouble. They knew what went on at school;
they assumed and probably correctly so, that the experience we were having was not
much different than the one they had had. There was no mystery to be gotten to the
bottom of. Why would they go to the school?

A1.2 Exploring Otherness

A1.2.1 Exploring Otherness
A1.2.2 The Red Cow
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A1.2.1 Exploring Otherness

In some ways it came directly from my parents, this source of Otherness. For
whatever reason, my father saw himself as apart, not of we. My father was the youngest
of four children in his family and from my observation of him I think he always thought
he was less than the others. He married late in life, a full 38 years old when he married,
and he had lived much of his life as second or third to his brothers. His beloved older
sister had died in the Spanish flu epidemic and his brother, with whom he was a partner
on the farm, and who had married much earlier, and had had a family, tragically died of
intestinal cancer the year I was born. I suspect my father lived with guilt because of these circumstances.

My mother most definitely conceived of herself as Other. There is no doubt she was Other. She had been born of a teenage pregnancy in 1922. Two brothers married two sisters, at least that is what we were always told, and she was the result of the liaison of two very young parents. Her mother was 16 years old. She was adopted by the older set, as her parents I do not believe ever lived together as a family. She was a girl adopted into a farm family where two boys were the natural children of her parents, biologically her aunt and uncle. She remembered always that she had been given away and if you had met her she would have told you in the first five minutes of conversation that her mother gave her away. My mother grew up as Otherness and I suspect her way of seeing the world was passed along to me.

Like my father, I suspect that family geography played a role in my conception of Otherness. I was neither fish nor fowl being the middle of five children, two older sisters and two younger brothers. I was outgoing in a family of quiet, shy people. I pushed outward whenever I could. But in the end I was female and rural, eventually being required to live in a world that was male and urban, or at least town or village.

My husband had different roots. He was male and urban but had been doted on by a mother and a sister who was nine years his elder. But he grew up in public housing and the hard streets of Halifax, not the refinements of the golf course or the tennis courts that would eventually be required of the world in which he lived.

I do not know the exact moment when I became Other but it was at some point early in my life. I don’t think I was born that way but it may have come four years later at the moment of my youngest brother’s birth. From that moment on I had two older sisters and two younger brothers. I remember it, my mother in a burgundy taffeta housecoat with pink and turquoise flowers on it that she never wore at home waving to us kids in the car from the hospital window. I became the proverbial “monkey in the middle” in terms of family geography. For years after, my parents referred to “the girls”
by whom they meant my two older sisters and “the boys” by whom they meant my two younger brothers. They did not mean by either, me.

As a child despite being the middle of five children with only eight years between youngest to eldest, I did not have natural playmates. Occasionally I made strategic alliances, sometimes with Jean, sometimes with Linda and in late childhood with Bert. For whatever reason never with Chuck, the brother immediately next to me in age.

Generally I ventured forth into the neighbourhood more than the others or I spent time alone in a world of imagination or I spent time with animals of my acquaintance. The animals of my acquaintance were many. I grew up on a dairy farm with at least 50 head of cattle at any given moment in time, a flock of leghorns, any number of barn cats (perhaps 15) and one or two dogs. My earliest lesson of Other actually came from an animal.

A1.2.2 The Red Cow

My father was a dairy farmer. We had Holsteins. They were the preferred breed of Southern Ontario dairy farmers of that era. In Ontario they were bred for size, for black and white colouring, and for udder capacity. I was five at the time. All the cows were black and white but for one. They had all been given names, mostly by my two older sisters more so than by my father: Friend, Boots, Wildeyes, Bellyache, Rocket, Margaret (I named her), Isobel (after my deceased grandmother), but for one, and she was The Red Cow.

It was summer. My father was milking. It must have been a morning milking or else it was raining out. I know this because my mother milked in the evening if harvest activities were going on and it was definitely my father that was present this day. The cows stood in three rows, 10 to a row. The first two rows were preferred by my father and row three was left partially vacant. I was standing or sitting and playing in the vacant stalls in row three, what we called “the third stable”. The Red Cow stood in the second stable directly across from me. I was more playing than watching my father milk. I was wearing a turquoise halter top that had elastic at the midriff and a lacy fringe on top. I had
the tricycle, not my tricycle but the tricycle shared by all, in the stall with me and a
couple of kittens were crawling about my shoulders. My father was going about the
business of milking: washing udders, putting on milking straps, emptying milking
machines into a pail, moving the three milking machines from cow to cow.

Suddenly there was a commotion. I did not see what happened. I heard for the
first time in my life my father use the word “sonofabitch”. I looked up from my tricycle­
kitten world and saw him grab The Red Cow’s tail. He twisted it and she kicked back at
him. She hit my father. He grabbed the pitch fork. Did he hit her with the handle or did he
stab her with the fork end? I do not know for certain. I was scared. I know from this
moment on The Red Cow was mean and horrible. She had made my usually gentle father
angry. She was a sonofabitch and I feared her.

In fairness to The Red Cow I believe that she had recently calved, that her
udder was sensitive, that she had kicked at my father when he was washing her udder,
that she had the misfortune of hitting him, that she kicked a second time when he twisted
her tail, and that she had the misfortune of hitting him a second time. But for me from
this moment on, her Otherness had qualities. She was vile tempered, unpredictable, and
to be avoided. When I saw her in the pasture I would not go near her. If she wouldn’t
come when I was getting the cows I would sic the dog. I was having none of Other.

In truth I learned two lessons that day about Other. The first was that she was
to be feared. The second was what treatment Other received. She was stabbed with a
pitch fork and had the dog sicced on her. It is generally my observation and experience
that the lessons taught that day between the second and third stable hold. I believe I
attempted to overcome these lessons a little in my twenties. It was on my honeymoon.
We drove from Manitoba where we were living to my new in-laws in Halifax. We drove
through Quebec. In one region of Quebec we encountered herds of red Holsteins. I was
amazed. I made my new husband stop the truck so I could take a picture of a herd of red
Holsteins. I gave the picture to my father. Looking back, perhaps I was trying to undo the
lesson of The Red Cow.
A1.2.3 Playing Army

From grades 1 through 6 I attended a one-room school house that at the time housed grades 1 through 8 on the corner of my father’s farm. Things were much more casual in those days and my father had recently donated land so we could have a bigger baseball diamond. In the time that I went to the school there were between 19 and 25 kids in the school each year. The fathers of most of the kids who attended the school were farmers too. A few were not. My widowed Aunt Esther was a teacher and there was one family whose father owned and operated heavy equipment. And then there was the owner of the General Store; the Merchant Class in our little universe despite the fact that the Merchant Class also cleaned the school daily.

I don’t remember if I was in grade two and The Merchant Class daughter was in grade seven or I was in grade three and The Merchant Class daughter was in grade eight. I could figure it out but it really doesn’t matter. Also I don’t remember exactly how this incident began but I sure remember how it ended.

The month was most likely May. At recesses and lunch hours the boys of the school were playing softball on the relatively new diamond that was formerly a corner of our pasture. The girls were playing army. I don’t know how long the army game had been going on for. The Merchant Class was the general. She had organized us into marching columns, lined us up beside the school wall, and was beginning to select lieutenants. I don’t know what the breaking point was for me. It may have been that I was not selected as a lieutenant or it may have been that my sense of justice, fair play, and equality had been violated. (I have checked this memory recently with my sisters who remember it vaguely. The one thing they were certain of, however, is that my “freak out” was caused by not being selected as a lieutenant.) I do not remember. What I do remember is that despite the fact that every girl in the school (including my two older sisters) was playing army, at that moment in time I refused.

I remember breaking away from the neatly formed line of girls against the school wall, saying to The Merchant Class that she was too bossy and that I was not going to play anymore. I ran to the corner of the school yard where the monkey bars were
and I sat and waited. Of course, I had expected that one defection from the army would have led to hundreds, if not thousands. But I was wrong. The obedient soldiers remained against the school wall.

For the next three days I spent every recess and lunch hour alone at the monkey bars; the rest of the soldiers marched on. I decided to turn the monkey bars into a fort. I suspect the logic was that I would have to defend myself against the army. I gathered up grass clippings and lined the fort. I either brought from home or found somewhere large pieces of cardboard which I intertwined amongst the monkey bars such that I would at least be shielded from view. Before school on the morning of the fourth day before The Merchant Class arrived some of the girls came to see my fort. We talked about the possibility of adding burlap sacks (something readily available to every girl in the school from granaries) to further impair views. By recess the wave of desertions began. By the end of the fifth day all the girls in the school were engaged in fort building. The army was disbanded.

When I look back at this incident from 50-something, I just don’t know where I got my courage from. Why was I so willing to turn myself into Other?

A1.2.4 The Apartment Cat

My second animal lesson in Other took place about three metres from where The Red Cow had stood 10 years earlier, once again in the passageway between the second and third stable. My cousin Anne was a nursing student in Toronto. At the beginning of her second year she and four other nursing students rented an apartment together. Anne came to the farm and took a kitten for the apartment. They named the kitten J.A.M.P.A., a name derived from the first letter of each of the five nursing students’ names. I don’t remember if Jampa lived in Toronto one, two, or three years but when the nursing students moved on she was brought back to the farm. But she had become Other. She was the grey striped of most of our barn cats but she was almost twice their size. Remarkable to us, she had a little blue collar. For certain, except that she had been born in one, she had never lived in a barn.
I do not remember exactly who was with me. It may have been one of my brothers and it may have been one of Anne’s sisters, Ruth or Joan. It was not Anne. In any case the two of us or the three of us walked in to the stable. I was holding the gigantic Jampa in my arms. At the time we had two dogs, a Great Dane named Cindy and a German Shepherd named Mutt. Cindy and Mutt lived in peaceful co-existence with each other and with the barn cats. Holding Jampa, we walked through the barn. As we passed the feed room, the two dogs emerged. At their appearance Jampa started to squirm. By the time I got to the passageway between the second and third stable she leapt from my arms onto the floor. The two dogs gave chase. Jampa was chased up the walls of the barn and from what I could see got away. We took the dogs out of the barn to give her a chance to come down. Presumably she did. The fact is, we never saw her again.

Jampa was Other. Although in the place of her birth, she was a stranger in a strange land. The dogs saw her as Other. She looked different and I am sure she smelled different. She was chased. She either left or failed to survive. It was a second valuable indisputable animal lesson of Other.

**A1.2.5 The Village School**

By the time my sister next to me was in grade eight, someone somewhere had made the decision that a village school was a better place than a country school for grade seven and eight. I was in grade six when this decision was made and so it was my last and final year at the one-room school. In grade seven I was bussed to the village school. It was a nine-room school with one room for each grade and kindergarten. In my grade seven class about half the kids were just like me, bussed from other rural schools, another quarter were from the original village, and the final quarter were from a new subdivision that was being developed next to the original village (part of the Toronto exodus to the suburbs).

It was a much different experience from the homogeneous world whence I came and for me it was the beginning of true Otherness. At ages 11 and 12 I was no longer the spirited fort-building nonconformist. I desperately wanted to fit in especially with those modern suburbanites. But I did not. I was rural. I was not pretty. I did not have
nice clothes or even a lot of them. I was academically perhaps in the upper third of the class but that did not help. I was mostly excluded although I did not admit it to myself. I could not name it then but I felt something. I was Other.

A1.2.6 From Dumb to Smart

For grade eight not much changed. Towards the end of grade eight each student was called in by the principal, who was also our classroom teacher, and was given guidance on choice of high school programme. He was a Japanese Canadian with a brush cut, quite probably the first non-Caucasian I had known or even met in my life. In Ontario at the time there were three streams of secondary school education: Arts and Science; Business and Commerce; and Science, Technology, and Trades. In each stream there were also options of programmes. For Business and Commerce and Science, Technology, and Trades there were 2-year, 4-year, or 5-year programmes. For Arts and Science, there were 4-year or 5-year programmes. In my community too, the choosing of each stream also meant bussing to a different high school. The Arts and Science high school was closest to the farm in a small town with which my parents were quite familiar, perhaps six miles from the farm. The Business and Commerce high school was new and in a greenfield location another 10 miles or so along the main highway. The Science, Technology, and Trades high school was in large city-like location a total of 20 miles away from the farm.

I had selected the 5-year Arts and Science programme. Mr. Brushcut asked me if my parents had been consulted on my choice of high school. I said they had not and pointed out to him that both my sisters went to that school. He said he would like to talk to my parents. I told him that there was no point in talking to them and that I knew more about choosing a high school than they did. He said that the reason he wanted to talk to them was because he thought I ought to be considering the Business and Commerce high school and perhaps a 4-year programme. He considered me an average student probably capable of high school but not beyond, and that a 4-year Business and Commerce programme would give me secretarial skills and therefore better job skills than a 5-year academic programme, even if I was capable of graduating. I never mentioned the
conversation to my parents. I knew their preference was based on location and there was no point in swimming against the tide.

However, I am sure it was Mr. Brushcut’s recommendation that got me placed in the dumb class in grade nine. There were two grade nine classes in the school: 9A for the smart kids and 9B for the dumb kids. For grade nine and ten I was in the dumb class. In truth I was the smartest kid in the dumb class and I don’t know what happened over the summer but when I returned to school in September in grade eleven, I had been inexplicably placed in the smart class. I was horrified. I had not asked to be. My dumb colleagues rejected me, thinking, I suppose, that I had asked to be transferred. My smart colleagues did not welcome me either. I was neither fish nor fowl.

For some reason, either through bureaucratic error or someone rationally deciding, I had been set socially adrift. The reaction of my peers to the arrogance of my presumptuousness of my reclassification paled in comparison with the reaction of one of my teachers. Although she had been my home room teacher in grade ten, in grade eleven now with me in the smart class, she picked on me relentlessly. She was the French teacher and at every opportunity she had she tried to demonstrate that I did not belong in the smart class. I think I had about 87% in French but she challenged everything I did. If I wrote on the board, it was too untidy or too big or something. I even remember re-doing a French essay. On the first attempt she had given me a B and I wanted to improve the grade. I re-did it. She had me read it to the class. She criticized my accent and the essay in front of everyone. She said in front of the whole class that it was not much better and she was reluctantly raising the grade to a B+. My smart colleagues told me after class that it was worth much more and that they did not know why she was being so unfair to me. They were embarrassed for me because of the situation the teacher had put me in.

I did not, however, ask to be put back in the dumb class. I think I wanted to believe that merit alone had moved me from dumb to smart and I think I was afraid to ask in case it was just bureaucratic error. Yet it was cause of great angst for a 15-year-old. I was in social no man’s land. Perhaps these experiences, though, helped me prepare for a life as Other.
A1.2.7 Rich, Beautiful, and Intelligent

At the end of grade twelve before the beginning of grade thirteen, my parents sold the farm and we moved to a new life. We moved into a brand new house that was about 100 kilometres from the place where all the circumstances of my life, my parents’ lives, my grandparents’ lives, and even my great-grandparents’ lives had taken place. My father found the transformation of the landscape caused by the ever-increasing proximity of the city of Toronto to be unbearable and so he chose to move away where he would not have to witness it daily.

I attended grade thirteen in the new town. Many of the kids thought I was from Toronto so I was accorded an air of sophistication that I neither had nor deserved. As luck would have it too, grade thirteens were bussed from another high school and the kids from there thought I was from the town and the town kids thought I was from the other high school. So there was a blending of students in grade thirteen anyway. There were 3 grade thirteen classes, but there was no ranking dumb to smart. Instead, home room depended upon which electives you were taking. I made friends. Although I was far from the prom queen, I had emerged from my neither fish nor fowl world.

The next year I became the first member of my extended family to attend university. I enrolled at Victoria College at the University of Toronto and at first chose to live in residences. Even though I had spent a glorious year in grade thirteen, old demons returned. The rooms were assigned through a combination of academic standing and seniority. Frosh were in double rooms. The rooms nearest the common room and elevator were for the dumbest, the rooms on either end of the hall were for the smartest. I was placed in the room immediately beside the common room.

It was my observation that all the girls on my floor were intelligent, beautiful, and rich while I on the other hand was stupid, ugly, and poor. I tolerated the feelings until Christmas, at which time I moved out and in with my sister who shared an apartment with a roommate. I did go back to residences as a sophomore with more confidence. In truth I have lifelong friends from residences at Victoria College. For one brief but shining moment in my life I felt “we”.

A1.2.8 Why Are There No Seats?

I graduated from university, completed an M.B.A., launched a professional career, got married, and had children. That tale is told elsewhere. I followed my mining husband around the country and had a series of jobs. In 1991 we moved to Newfoundland and at age 40 I began what would become my life’s work, university administration.

Perhaps as I got older or as I saw it rising in my children, I forgot about my own otherness. It all came rushing back to me as I attended my first conference of nonacademic university administrators, my peers, a group for which at this writing, I serve on the Board. I went to that first conference knowing no more than two or three others from a group of over 300 hundred delegates. On perhaps the second day of the conference there was a coffee break and we were herded into a room that had café style tables but seating for only about 100 delegates. It was clear that not everyone was going to be able to sit down. I sat at a table that had three other chairs still empty. A nice looking white-haired man walked into the room. He looked at me sitting at the table. Our eyes met. I don’t remember if I gestured to him to sit down or not but immediately he shouted in a very loud voice looking around with a scowl on his face: “Why are there no seats here?” I was humiliated. I was able to hold back the tears for a few minutes. I got up and left. I do not know if he took the seat or not. I went back to my hotel room and sobbed. Was it that I was in a new group and was being overly sensitive? Or was my Otherness so painfully obvious that I was invisible? Was I so ugly that a person couldn’t bear to sit with me when there were obviously no other seats? Was it that a fat woman from Newfoundland was such a pariah that to be seen in her company for just a few minutes was just too humiliating? Eight years later I would be his supervisor.

A1.2.9 Canucks Fans

Since we have lived in Vancouver, we have occasionally gone to Canucks games. Mostly Daughter and I go. For us it is a remarkable experience. We always take the sky train from New Westminster and it begins on the train. What begins is a feeling like we belong. Daughter has a Canucks jersey and I have a scarf. Almost everyone on the train is dressed in Canucks wear. On the train everyone is excited and anticipating the game. People are all talking to each other and they are excited and we feel like we
belong, we who are almost always not belonging. It is astounding for us, the feeling of togetherness, of common purpose of mission that comes from the wearing of colours. Altogether foreign experiences. Then we arrive in GM Place. The arena is awash in the white, royal and navy blue, and the burgundy of the Canucks. Everyone shouts the same thing at the same time: “Ber-tuz-zi, Ber-tuz-zi” we all shout together. We do the wave together. We sing the Tom Connors song at intermission together. We all know the words. We sigh and hold our breath together and we cheer and clap together. We drink from the fountain of inclusion and it is amazing.

A1.2.10 Anson and Jarome

Daughter and I have long been big Anson Carter fans. We remember the time he scored the winning goal at the World Hockey Championship. Along with the Olympic gold medal in 2002 it is one of our favourite hockey moments. Anson scored the goal but there was a very long wait before the goal judge announced it. We could see it at home on TV but he could not. The wait for him was interminable. It was the winner! Afterwards he did a series of press interviews. Daughter and I talked to each other about what a wonderful representative he was for both Canadian hockey and for Canada. He was humble and polite and he was so the Toronto suburb where he grew up. He made us feel proud to be Canadians. A few years later when the Calgary Flames went all the way to the Stanley Cup we had much the same conversation around Jarome Iginla, except for his being an Albertan. At this point, for whatever reason, I feel compelled to say we had the same conversations also around Wayne Gretzky at many points in his career and around Mario Lemieux especially when he came back from beating cancer and when he was the captain of the winning Olympic hockey team. The four taken together are what we like in hockey players: good hockey players, humble, polite and, as a result, great representatives of what we think of ourselves as Canadians.

And so in the fall of 2005 when we heard that Anson Carter had been traded to our beloved Canucks we were thrilled. (Equally as pissed in the summer of 2006 when they did not re-sign him.) Even more exciting, we were able to get tickets for the Flames–Canucks game on December 23. Middle Son had scored the tickets but he elected not to
go and so it was Eldest Son (home for Christmas), Daughter, my husband, and I who went to the game.

Here we were awash in belonging and it was exciting. The seats we had were at one end pretty high in the “nosebleeds” but the view was good and it was fine. The play started and then “it” began almost immediately. There were seven young guys and one father immediately behind us. The guys were in their early twenties, were Caucasian and it was quite apparent that they had been drinking. Instead of the usual calls for Bertuzzi or Mark-us, Mark-us, they criticized every move either team made and their language was foul. Their insults were almost all derogatory towards women. They yelled at the Calgary goalie Miikka Kiprusoff who the day before had announced that he needed the time to rest and he would not be playing in the Olympics. “Kippra-sucks,” they yelled. “Play for your country, you pussy.” When a mistake was made they said, “Morrison is a bitch. What a girl!” They said, “Come on ladies.” There was also a lot of swearing and someone complained about their language. A member of the GM Place security staff came back and warned them about their language. The member of the security staff was Asian. He had a shaven head, was quite muscular, and looked not to be tangled with.

The second period started and the Vancouver goalie Alex Auld was in front of us. He let a bad goal in. They yelled, “Go back to the Moose, you bum.” The commentary and the language continued. They got into a yelling match with the woman across the aisle. She told them that they were ruining the game, that there were children present, and that their language was not acceptable. She went to security again. The same fellow came back and told them if there were any more complaints that they would be thrown out. The security fellow asked us if we were okay, my husband answered, “Yes, there is no problem.” In fact, my husband bought some nachos and popcorn and shared with them. I was not sure what his logic was; keep their mouths full so they can keep them shut? When the security guy left the father said, “We shouldn’t take that from him. We need to keep these minorities in their place.” This remark prompted a discussion with two Asian guys behind the seven drunks and one father. There was almost a fight but,
partly because my husband intervened, “Come on now just enjoy the game,” things calmed once again.

It was the third period and we had Miikka Kiprusoff in front of us again. Anson Carter got a really good shot on goal but he crashed into the side of the net. From behind we heard, “Now slow down there Coal Train.” A few minutes later Anson and Jarome were on the ice at the same time and the drunks shouted, “Look, two Coal Trains at once.” I was no longer comfortable or happy about belonging. I wished I didn’t belong. I wanted to be my regular Other self again. I was ashamed that my children, although adults themselves at 20 and 24, were exposed to this evening.

This incident made me think about racism and my own construction of myself as a Canadian. How can it be in 2005, in the wonderful cosmopolitan city of Vancouver, that this took place? This can’t be my country. About three weeks later, though, I heard a sportscaster talking about the line Anson Carter played on with the Sedins twins. Daughter and I always call them the Double Digit Line. Daniel Sedin was number 22, Henrik Sedin was number 33, and Anson Carter was number 77. The sportscaster called them the Two Brothers and a “Brother” line. I am sure it was meant to be witty. I wondered, however, if that sort of reference to race encouraged prejudice such as the kind we experienced that night. I will always be left wondering, should we have done something different that night than we did?


A1.2.11 With Apologies to Roch Carrier

It was now the Christmas of 2005 just a few days after the Flames–Canucks game. Daughter got a pile of money for Christmas, at least $300. I wondered what she would do with it. In the Boxing Day sales that followed, she and I went to the mall. She went into the sporting goods store. I was amazed at what she bought. She bought a Calgary Flames jersey. She who is the biggest Canucks fan in the universe! I wondered what impact that terrible night had on her. I didn’t ask her. A few days later we went
shopping again and she was wearing the Flames jersey now. People booed and hissed as she passed. The bus driver told her (jokingly) that she was not allowed on the bus. She didn’t care. I knew her actions were prompted by how horrible we felt that night we belonged. I got it finally. She was so comfortable in the skin of Other that this was the way she had of saying it. I am in awe of this child.

A1.3 A Parent in the Classroom

A1.3.1 The Shrum Bowl

Think the Canadiens and the Leafs, the Flames and the Oilers—no, those are wrong. Think the Cubs and the White Sox, the Mets and the Yankees, the Athletics and the Giants, getting closer. Think Saint Mary’s and Dalhousie, McGill and Concordia, Carleton and Ottawa, Toronto and York, then think SFU and UBC. Nothing like a cross-town rivalry to bring out the best in everyone. And so it was that Daughter and I attended The Shrum Bowl, the annual SFU Clansman and UBC Thunderbirds football game. Cold, rainy, and foggy the way the fall classic is meant to be enjoyed in the Greater Vancouver Regional District. Don’t be fooled by Olympic propaganda, Vancouver is the rainiest place on earth year around.

It is autumn of 2007. We are walking along in front of the makeshift grandstand looking for our seats. We are wearing our Clansmen red and blue scarves, “Go Red, go Blue, go SFU.” Someone from the grandstand behind calls Daughter’s name. We don’t see who at first. Then she calls again, more determinedly. It is a woman, with a husband and a wet and soggy teenager, all huddled together. The woman asks Daughter, “Don’t you remember me?” Daughter replies she does not. The woman says, “I am Dalton’s mother.” Daughter says yes, she remembers Dalton from her grade five, six, and seven class, and she remembers Dalton’s mother now when she has a good look, seeing past the raincoat hoods and umbrellas. Dalton’s mother used to volunteer in Daughter’s class and since Daughter was deemed “special needs”, frequently she was assigned as her aide. Daughter asks what Dalton is doing now. Dalton’s mother says that Dalton is at UBC and is in fact one of the Thunderbird players about to take the field. Daughter asks what number he is so we can cheer him on despite our obvious loyalties to
the Red and Blue of the Clansman. Dalton’s mother with some hesitation (methinks) asks Daughter what she is doing now. Daughter tells her she is a student at SFU. Dalton’s mother says, “I always knew you were very smart and I tried to tell them.”

The Clansmen lose the game miserably. We are cold and wet. Dalton plays well; we are pleased for that.

But I will always wonder. What if it had been me volunteering in the class instead of Dalton’s mother? Would it have made a difference? What if I had seen what she saw? Her words hang in the air and surround me like the fog.
APPENDIX 2

A2.1 Developing Browne’s Metaphor

The following is from Prosser’s 2007 work entitled *Weaving a Whole Cloth*.

Metaphor as a response to representational challenges

My use of the tapestry metaphor was a practical response to representational challenges in my doctoral work. It sought to find a way through the dichotomy between the academic/analytical text which seeks to reduce ambiguity and the literature/narrative text which seeks to remain open for interpretation. It also sought to find a structure that could allow me to juxtapose student accounts, critically orientated collaborative texts and my interpretation as a critical scholar, while preventing an emphasis on the political from squeezing out or manipulating the voices of the students. Thirdly, it sought to allow close scrutiny of the complexity of individual experiences, while still enabling the reader to stand back and interpret the cloth as a whole. This was achieved by arranging the data produced from the previously discussed method by using the Bayeux Tapestry’s structure of Hem, Scenes and Central Panel. Retrieved on August 15, 2008 from www.aare.edu.au/07pap/pro07634.pdf.

He uses the metaphor to help capture and then to interpret and understand the narratives of A.D.D. children. Although his metaphor is far more sophisticated than mine, coming across his work, especially given his area of research interest gave me the courage to put forward my (in truth Jill Browne’s) crude metaphor for many of the same reasons Prosser has cited above.

I am not generally an impulse buyer. I look at something and look at it again and then maybe the third or fourth time I look I might decide to buy it. As a result I do not often have buyer’s remorse, but I do from time to time suffer from looker’s remorse.
Sometimes when you go back the second or third time the article is no longer there, or if you are in a faraway city and you see something and you do not buy it, that too can cause looker’s remorse. I still think about the living room side chairs Middle Son, Daughter, and I saw in San Francisco. We had driven there from Vancouver in a minivan so it would have been so easy. But Middle Son refused to be seen (by whom?) walking down the street in San Francisco carrying a chair to the parking garage and so they (the chairs that is) stayed in San Francisco never to be seen again. I will never see so perfect chairs again. I know that. However, because contradiction is the essence of life, the only thing I ever bought impulsively was a house. And that may explain my next case of looker’s remorse.

I was on Austin Avenue in Coquitlam going to the notary public who was handling the legal transaction of my house. I had arrived at the mini-mall early and so had some time to kill. There was a store called Gifts Galore that sold, I don’t really know how to describe it, mythical perhaps occult figurines, you know, sort of Harry Potter but a step further. I think, but I could be wrong, they have Asian roots. Or perhaps their roots are the Dungeons and Dragons game and subsequent subculture. Although my sister-in-law had sent me the metaphor perhaps a year or even two years earlier I saw it in that store in physical presence. But I did not buy it so I can only describe it to you. It was basically rectangular in shape about the size of one and a half closed laptops and was fundamentally grey in colour. It had seven figures embedded in it. At each corner elevated above a perhaps five-inch wall that surrounded the entire piece was a gargoyle-like figure, each of the four unique. In the middle of the piece was a large figure, dragon and dinosaur at the same time. He was standing on his rear haunches, his front claws waving in the air. Behind him was a building, a castle. At his rear feet in front of him was a mound which had three small jewels/lights, which he was clearly protecting. Interestingly the jewels which lit up were pastel coloured, one pink, one turquoise, and one light blue. That is how it came to be that on the way to sign papers to take possession of my house I saw my life metaphorically in front of my very eyes.

I accept that the metaphor, as my sister-in-law described it and as I saw it in the mini-mall, is true. Each and every vignette can be seen as contributing to the whole
metaphor. Some are about building the wall, built mostly by me, my husband contributing occasionally, to protect the jewels at first. Others are about the actions of the sentinels, me and my husband initially, but Eldest Son and Daughter eventually joining the ranks. In many ways the whole story is about the growth of the dragon-dinosaur, that is, the rage in Middle Son. To this day, he is still there, the dragon-dinosaur, but so are the jewels. Daughter and I, just the two of us now, still constantly pace the top of the wall.

A2.2 The Metaphor of the Sentinels, the Dragon, and the Jewels

It was not always this way. In the beginning there was no wall. There was a perimeter though. The inside of the perimeter was private and outside the perimeter was public. At first there were just the two gargoyle parents tending first to the blue garjewel, then the turquoise one, and finally the pink one. Even in the beginning the private was sanctuary and protection, and the public was where adventures took place. The parent gargoyles happily sent the blue garjewel into the public. First they sent him with a canine nursemaid, they sent him on a bicycle, they sent him in snow and ice, and then they sent him to Zellers for lunch in French. One day the blue garjewel was attacked in the public space and the mother gargoyle, hoping to save him from harm, went into the public herself to try to understand. The blue garjewel liked the public space and was not deterred by the harm. His light shone brighter.

By this time the turquoise and the pink garjewels had joined the private space. The parent gargoyles noted that the turquoise garjewel was not the same as the blue garjewel. They were not sure what was different about him. They could not determine if his skin was thicker or thinner or just different and they thought a lot about the word “react”. They went to Minnesota to try to improve the turquoise garjewel’s skin. The turquoise garjewel reacted differently than the blue one did in both the private and public space. They thought a lot too about the word “impulsive.” The turquoise garjewel reacted to being taken to the beach by impulsively running into the water. He didn’t care that he could not swim. In the mud that was behind the mound where the pastel garjewels stayed

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Garjewel is a word I have invented for the metaphor. It combines gargoyle (which the parents were) and jewels (which the children grew from). Therefore the children are garjewels.
in the private space, the mother gargoyle began to bury words. She buried “react”, “impulsive”, and “predisposition”. She buried “Feingold” and “Ritalin”. One day in November the turquoise garjewel rolled in different mud that was in the public space and the mother gargoyle buried “normal”. She also began to build the wall around the perimeter. She knew she had to provide sanctuary for the garjewels, especially the turquoise one, and keep the public away from the garjewels.

At the same time, the pink garjewel was also having unsatisfactory adventures in the public space. Although she did not add words to the mud behind the garjewel mound as a result of the pink garjewel’s adventures, the mother gargoyle watered the mound with tears. Finally this stage was over and the mother gargoyle buried shame and pride in the mud.

The next stage in the growth of the compound was surprising to the gargoyle parents. For the first time a public space gargoyle joined the parent gargoyles on top of the wall. She was special and she helped the parents patrol the public space, looking for harm that might come the way of the turquoise garjewel. But she could not stop all harm nor could the parents and one night while wearing a red tie and black shoes the turquoise garjewel was harmed. (I am again reminded of Clark Blaise’s (1993) words:

This was the violation of everything I had lived with, everything I believed, everything I trusted... Injustice I could live with. Indignity, never.... (T)he books that signal the outbreak of revolution, that trigger murder and assassination, not from oppression, but from a moment's inattention, the victim's casual assumption of the killer's lesser humanity. In books, people don't kill to avenge brutality; they avenge indignities. We can tolerate just about anything if we know in the final analysis we count for something, however slight... The motive for murder is not a criminal act, it's a small moral oversight (p 107).)

When he came home from the harm, he watered the mud behind the mound with his tears and from predisposition, reaction, impulsiveness, normal, shame, and pride, the dragon-dinosaur named rage hatched. When the mother gargoyle saw the dragon-dinosaur she knew immediately that the wall must be reinforced not only to keep out the public, but now it must keep in the private too. In the following years all the same forces
were in play. The public space would harm one or more of the garjewels and the mother gargoyle, occasionally joined by the father gargoyle, would try to mediate between keeping the public out and keeping the private in. Occasionally a public gargoyle would join the parents on the wall. The dragon-dinosaur got loose a few times. He hit with a stool and later went to Disneyland. He refused to do laps in gym class and ran home. He went to art class late and wrote a letter.

The pink garjewel had some of the same experiences in the public space but she did not turn to the dragon-dinosaur. Instead she accepted the sanctuary that the wall offered. Like all the gargoyle family though, she learned the necessity of keeping the dragon-dinosaur in and that became for her a greater focus then her own particular misadventures in the public space. It was true too for the blue garjewel and one night after chasing down neighbourhood kids in his car and almost pulling one through the window, the blue garjewel left the mound and took up his place with his parents on the top of the wall.

That is how the metaphor of the gargoyle sentinels, the dragon-dinosaur, and the jewels came into being. I hope it interprets and adds to the understanding of my narrative.
APPENDIX 3

A3.1  Next: Incidences 47, Previous: Incidences 14

A3.1.1  Next

Next door lived a couple with a son in jardin at the same school.

The next day Eldest Son as well as everyone else went to school.

The next evening Eldest Son had a nightmare, unusual for him.

The next night another nightmare, this time he woke up shouting “dead, dead”.

Whenever I saw her which was more likely next door rather than in some official school meeting, she remained positive about Eldest Son’s scholastics.

He came home the next day and told me that it was a special kind of scribbler.

She said next door at the librairie (stationary store) as well as anywhere else school supplies were sold.

It is why the next event came as a great shock to him and to me.

Next the snow harvest would begin.

After the next few snow storms the process on each street would begin again.

The next thing Très Belle came through the back door and she had clearly been sprayed by the garden hose.

I told him I was going to stop by the school the next morning and talk to Mrs. Seasoned.

I went the next morning and told Mrs. Seasoned, if not the error, the geography.

In early May I received another call from Madame Lapointe and she said she would like to have a conversation about placement of Daughter for next year.
Daughter should **next** year be placed in the English Separate School as language was a complication that was not needed in this case, that she should repeat Junior Kindergarten and that there was a Children’s Resource Centre in town and that she should be treated there.

The **next** summer Middle Son attended a YMCA day camp for two weeks.

One November morning in the **next** school year all that came crashing down.

The **next** month I used shamrocks on the calendar and I made it easier.

The **next** year things went from bad to worse.

The **next** day Mrs. Seasoned complained that the homework was too untidy.

The **next** day the children returned to the school for their first day.

The junior high was located **next** to the Catholic high school which in turn was located **next** to the mall.

The **next** story is a most significant one.

It comes his turn to step up to the **next** level on the riser.

I do not remember the exact circumstances under which the **next** event took place.

The **next** physical education class the teacher had the students choose sides again.

In any case the **next** morning he called the principal.

I do this for the **next** child.

In Newfoundland schools at the time there was a mandatory basic skills assessment test given in grade four towards the end of the year and the results were reported to the parents at the beginning of the **next** school year.

The **next** year, at the beginning of grade five, the test results were shared with me.

They had become the Newfoundland champions and the **next** year Newfoundland would host the Canada Winter Games.

The idea was to pass the light that is education to the **next** generation.

Why don’t you come to this school **next** year?
From that moment on he knew which school he wanted to go to next year.

Mr. Newcomer attended the next physical education class and saw for himself the conflict and the resolute will of the two combatants.

The next day Daughter came home with a sincere apologetic letter that tried to offer an explanation that she did not realize how immature the students were.

One night at about 6PM when I was not home, in fact I was in a hotel room in Vancouver, the next attack was launched.

The next morning I called Daughter’s school.

The next night I received a phone call from the mother of the kid who lived on our street.

I let her stay home the next day.

The next morning I went to the school and I went straight to the Drama room.

My next stop was the Vice Principal’s office, the same one that I had dealt with the previous fall.

When Daughter came home the next day she had a written letter of apology from the Drama teacher.

It is why the next incident was so regrettable.

The next morning early Middle Son and I camped out side Mrs. Minecaller’s office.

### A3.1.2 Previous

Together they had a fleet of Tonka trucks and had spent much of the previous summer operating a construction site (interestingly at 24 years old Eldest Son by profession is a project manager for a construction company) either on the beach or on a sand pile that sat between our house and Rascal’s.

The same brigade moved down the street as the previous year but this time Eldest Son and Screecher were on bicycles and Little Sister was on the tricycle, Ballou still the patient guide.

Ms. Scot sent home a list of school supplies to purchase and I tried to recycle what he had had at the previous school.

But the Halloween Party the previous year was held in the Old School, it was the same school that my father had attended.
For the first few months I continued to work as a consultant for my previous employer so occasionally went back to Quebec but basically worked from home.

We had shared freely information regarding his diagnosis from Ontario and from his previous school.

It was amazing to me especially given the previous experience in Ontario with an added complexity of language and everyone on the same bus yet there was never an incident of taunting.

The two concerts on the two previous nights had gone really well.

Whether it was because she knew me from the previous year or whether it was her way she took an interest in Middle Son.

Sister Mildred had retired at the end of the previous year and had been replaced by Mr. Moustache.

She offered some of the names that had been used in the previous phone calls.

My next stop was the Vice Principal’s office, the same one that I had dealt with the previous fall.

Mr. Coincident asked about where records could be obtained as the previous school had closed.

As she had had previous experiences with dislocation of the knee cap she wasn’t too sure what had happened.

A3.2 Same: Incidences 41, Different: Incidences 11

A3.2.1 Same

All the management people from the mine lived on the same street.

The older one started maternelle the same time as Eldest Son.

Next door lived a couple with a son in jardin at the same school.

She gave the same kind of heaven based Catholic explanation that I had given the night before.

The same brigade moved down the street as the previous year but this time Eldest Son and Screecher were on bicycles and Little Sister was on the tricycle, Ballou still the patient guide.

Eldest Son learned to read English at the kitchen table and at school too exactly the same way I had learned to read thirty years earlier.
But the Halloween Party the previous year was held in the Old School, it was the same school that my father had attended.

I remember Rob Jimson who was in the same grade as my sister eating the whole apple.

This was not primarily a result of her role as Eldest Son’s teacher but because she had taken the initiative to introduce Eldest Son to her son of the same age and they had become regular playmates.

When I went to register the children I found out that if Daughter who was only three was registered in junior kindergarten at the same school as Middle Son then he would go in the morning and she would go in the afternoon.

Although there were two distinct school boards Public and Separate all the children from the mine were bussed on the same bus, and yes amongst the 18 families at the mine site there were children that attended all six elementary schools.

All three of my children in school felt like it should have been a watershed moment but it did seem strange that although Middle Son and Daughter were 23 months apart they were starting school the same day.

A few minutes later the phone rang again and the same voice this time said I am Daughter’s teacher.

She did not seem particularly embarrassed but treated me much the same as Eldest Son had the night before, like I was a ‘know it all’.

Wait a minute I thought this is the same child that the Scarborough therapists had described as pleasant, cooperative and willing.

Around the same time Middle Son developed an eczema like rash on his face, hands, arms and legs.

For the first time and one of only three years in total all three kids were in the same school, the English Separate School.

The diagnosis was exactly the same as it had been three years earlier.

Mr. Office used the opportunity to point out to me that these were not the same snowpants that the other children were wearing.

He called her in and she told exactly the same story.

His teacher also related exactly the same story almost word for word.

This was the last year they were all in the same school.
He just kept taking the same French over and over again.

The other two kids had the same experience.

The French they had learned in Ontario which starts French at junior kindergarten was repeated in Newfoundland which starts French in grade one or two and then that same French was repeated again in British Columbia which starts French at an even higher grade, grade four or five.

The teacher he was assigned was the wife half of a husband and wife team that taught at the school (at least that is what I thought, but during the course of this telling Middle Son advised me that although they had the same surname they were actually sister in law and brother in law).

Unlike Ontario where all the students that went to any school were bussed on the same bus in Newfoundland, the Protestants went on one bus and the Catholics went on another.

It was amazing to me especially given the previous experience in Ontario with an added complexity of language and everyone on the same bus yet there was never an incident of taunting.

The same scenario did not play out in the evening as the busses dropped students at different times, but the morning ritual was strange to say the least.

He did have a very close friend who went to the same school as the ‘heathens’ and so I think he really could not see the irrational differences that were the fundamental bases of the wars.

On any given Saturday morning there were exactly the same twenty or so people that had been there the Saturday morning before.

I can tell you that if I made a remark to a man at the mine the same as you made to Middle Son yesterday I would be fired and I would deserve to be.

If I had my way you would be held to the same standard that I am held to at the mine.

Each parent was given a schedule and you were to go from room to room the same as the student did to attend classes visiting with each of his teachers.

We had learned from experience that everything was just plain better for everyone if the kids were not in the same school, and four years of Sister Mildred had caused him at this moment to reconsider the option of public schools.
Instead of the rotary class scheduling the Transition Eight students had the same teacher for all academic subjects but participated with all other students in classes such as shop or physical education.

He was a very young looking man wearing a short sleeved white shirt who had the same name as a famous hockey player.

The seat mate was suspended for the same length of time.

We still had our rule about not going to the same school and as this school had a pretty good reputation I thought it would be acceptable for her.

My next stop was the Vice Principal's office, the same one that I had dealt with the previous fall.

You cannot bring back the sixteenth birthday of a girl who has been isolated and alone most of her life who finally has a best friend who has a birthday the same time as hers.

### A3.2.2 Different

He and Rascal were very different kids and had not struck up a friendship.

It was convenient that the schools permitted the children to take a different bus after school than the route they took in the morning dropping them conveniently at the daycare.

After several different ointments and combinations of ointments with no success he was referred to a paediatrician in Thunder Bay.

He told me that the behaviour expected in a kindergarten classroom and a grade one classroom were two completely different things, and the fact that Mrs. Known had not made any comment about Middle Son's behaviour should not be used as a guide in the present situation.

He did experience one of the pitfalls that attends those moving from province to province each with a different school curriculum.

I had not noticed anything exceptional or different about Mrs. Specialed upon first meeting her.

The same scenario did not play out in the evening as the busses dropped students at different times, but the morning ritual was strange to say the least.
Teachers should remember that they have in their classes children like my children who may see things from a very different perspective.

The shoes were a different story.

We were even fortunate that our house was basically on the dividing line between the catchments of two different high schools.

At the last minute he would always go back to retrieve a different CD or a game or a book or a magazine that we wanted to have with him for the day.

**A.3.3 Good: 24 Incidences, Bad: 3 Incidences**

**A.3.3.1 Good**

*Mr Whiskers* looked pretty good for seventeen.

If I have not solved this particular cultural mystery at least I know why *Mr. Whiskers* looked so good at seventeen, sixteen years ‘*en plastique*’.

He was and is good at it.

She said that she already had a pretty good idea who they were that she would investigate and that it would not happen again.

Eldest Son and I were both pretty good at speaking French by the time we were getting ready to leave Quebec.

It was not a good start.

Daughter said little about school one way or the other although the fact that she went willingly was a good sign.

Eldest Son was a very good reader, keeping up in mathematics, interested in social studies and an untidy printer and writer.

So far so good.

Once we arrived in Quebec since the sitter came to the house we thought it would be a good time to try the Ritalin again.

Daughter summarized years later for me the message I heard, “Mrs. Hibbitts your children are useless and no good.”

When he came home he told me that the burgundy tie was not good enough.

Her advisor was a good friend of ours.
Of all the things that Mrs. Masters was good at the thing I think she was the best at was negotiating: she negotiated his anger, and she negotiated the system for him and for herself.

This is a really good school.

Despite the praises I have just sung of this school in many ways it was not a good place for Middle Son.

She said that she thought he had done some really good work including a piece that she found quite moving.

A very good watercolor of the entrance to the school in winter.

When I told him what had happened I heard a very good natured laugh on the end of the phone.

We still had our rule about not going to the same school and as this school had a pretty good reputation I thought it would be acceptable for her.

We thought it was good transitioning into independence for Eldest Son and an opportunity for a new beginning for Middle Son and Daughter.

I cannot believe the good fortune we had in finding someone so good at what he did at this late stage of the game.

Mrs. Minecaller thought that the idea of an advocate was a good one.

A3.3.2 Bad

The next year things went from bad to worse.

They said that they thought that Daughter was not aware that she was entering puberty and that she smelled bad and needed to shower more and use deodorant

In grade seven things went from bad to worse.

A3.4 Little: Incidences 22, Big: Incidences 5

A3.4.1 Little

Across the street lived two little blonde girls with screeches that could shatter crystal.

Screecher’s little sister was now going to maternelle as well.

The same brigade moved down the street as the previous year but this time Eldest Son and Screecher were on bicycles and Little Sister was on the tricycle, Ballou still the patient guide.
Whether it was the chaos of my life at this moment, three kids five and under, two in diapers, re-launching a stalled career or the constant concern that the mine might close, the fact of the matter is that I remember little of this year in terms of comings and goings at the school.

There was a little girl in his skating group who did not speak French at all.

There was a little red headed freckled boy who lived two doors down who was in kindergarten at Eldest Son’s school.

He spoke little English and they played together in French.

I was scared a little that I might have to do it and I did not want to be gasping the way Peter was.

Over the period of the two years I had gotten to know Ms. Scot a little better.

But for this we might have been tempted to put Eldest Son in Separate Immersion but decided he was better off going to school a little closer to home.

Daughter said little about school one way or the other although the fact that she went willingly was a good sign.

She had made a friend of one little boy whose mother was actually the French teacher of the two boys.

He weighed a little over 8 lbs.

She had a little note book that was broken down in ten minute intervals and she would check to see if Middle Son was on task.

She had sent him to be assessed by Mrs. Specialed and the diagnosis was that he had very little mathematical skill beyond the numbers themselves and basic addition and subtraction.

Although I have told about the strictness of this year at school as reported by the children, I had cause later to doubt it a little or maybe a lot.

He stumbled a little.

I knew her a little because she had completed her Masters degree the year before and she had worked at my place of employment when she was working on her Masters degree.

The school was small and therefore had little in the way of programming for exceptional children.
We all reclaimed a little tiny bit of normal.

My husband was away from Monday to Thursday night at the mine and therefore it would make little difference.

The temperature was a little cooler than normal for Vancouver and there was frost on the ground.

A3.4.2 Big

I remember one of the big boys, a grade eight, maybe it was Peter Murray bobbing for the apple.

Dr. McMaster told me he didn’t know if it was the circumstances of her birth or that she was just big awkward and clumsy it would make no difference to her.

Suffice it to say at this point that the Christmas Concert was a big deal.

She did seem to have one particular tormenter in her class a big freckled faced boy but Daughter always had a pretty sharp tongue and she could take care of herself.

I suspect that the other students viewed her as an outsider, big and tall with a strange accent.

A3.5 Particularly: Incidences 22, Generally: Incidences 1

A3.5.1 Particularly

I had not noticed that he was particularly agitated over the lunch hour.

She did not seem particularly embarrassed but treated me much the same as Eldest Son had the night before, like I was a ‘know it all’.

Madame Lapointe said that although the child was a mother tongue English speaker she had been raised in Quebec and that language was not particularly the issue.

He was not particularly fussy.

This hospital was not particularly well equipped for a pediatric admission and the nurses found Middle Son to be active.

Although we had not particularly heard from the teacher both others associated with the school such as the bus driver and Eldest Son had reported issues concerning Middle Son’s behaviour on the bus, in the bus lineup and in the school yard.
She said that it was not that he was particularly disruptive in the classroom; it was simply that he was not engaged.

In Eldest Son's classroom I heard about an intelligent articulate child who did not seem particularly motivated in his school work but preferred socializing to academics.

She did not particularly make friends at school though and at some point during the year perhaps at a parent teacher night I was informed by Mrs. Kindly that the issue of Daughter's size was one of the reasons she had not made friends.

I did not think she was particularly starved for affection at home but couldn't make sense of what I was being told.

Mrs. Team indicated that although Middle Son was not particularly engaged in the classroom activities he was not particularly 'trouble' either.

I do not know for certain but I expect that she intervened many times on his behalf particularly with Sister Mildred.

As much as I was generally in favour of the wearing of uniforms there was one occasion in which it was not particularly helpful.

Middle Son did not particularly complain about the tight rein held in the classroom, I suspect his days were still built around Mrs. Specialed.

Middle Son was not particularly one to “tell” on others, he had long ago learned that he rarely was able to cultivate empathy with authority figures.

They talked to him and to me about not solving things with violence, but they did not particularly give either of us much confidence that they would be able to deal with the tormenting of Middle Son.

It was not particularly our business and we neither got involved in nor did we enquire about the controversy.

I do not know if he was particularly talented or not but what I saw was a school that worked.

Enrolment had been dropping but there did not particularly seem to be any effort either publicly or from the pulpit to try to reverse the trend.

A boy would phone the house and ask to speak to Daughter then he would engage her in a conversation saying he was either some popular boy in school or someone else and say inappropriate things
not particularly sexual but things like "You know John Smith, he really likes you."

She was not particularly upset anymore.

Daughter was not particularly happy at her school.

**A3.5.2 Generally**

As much as I was generally in favour of the wearing of uniforms there was one occasion in which it was not particularly helpful.

**A3.6 Wrong: Incidences 19, Right: Incidences 19**

**A3.6.1 Wrong**

What’s wrong with them?

Since there was no So and So living at our house I said I am sorry you have the wrong number.

She asked me why I had said it was the wrong number the first time.

"See", he said, "you are wrong and it is Moncton".

Not only was New Brunswick wrong but also Saskatchewan and British Columbia.

I asked Eldest Son when he got home if she told the class that she had taught them the wrong capitals.

I thought it was wrong but at this stage I was so humiliated that I said nothing.

He had a sense that although he had been in the wrong too that justice had been fairly administered.

What’s wrong with her? What’s wrong with this picture?

Right or wrong we left less choice to Middle Son.

There were days when he could just not face going and so right or wrong I let him stay at home.

The number of discretionary days increased dramatically although I was wrong about one thing.

She wants to say "You were so wrong about me."

That is entirely the wrong thing to be thinking.

It was the wrong thing to do as I guess I didn’t realize the message that was truly being sent.
But I was wrong and the teacher was wrong (What do you mean a C plus?) and the school system for so many years was wrong about this child.

A3.6.2 Right

I told Eldest Son right away what had happened.

There was one item that I did not know what it was, I cannot remember the name now but it was a French word something like a cahier de catèchisme but I know that is not the right word.

We lived right at the mine site and there were a total of eighteen houses on the site.

She said I must be off tonight because she had said the right name and I must be just not prepared for Daughter to go to school.

Daughter had been born during precipitive labour and I knew that there were concerns right from the beginning about fine motor skills.

Middle Son was given Ritalin but getting the dosage right was tricky business.

It was not the right thing to be thinking.

At the time I never considered if this was the right thing or not.

Most of the children are looking right at her.

I will speak more of the Catholic high school in this community later but suffice it to say that this was absolutely the right choice.

Right or wrong we left less choice to Middle Son.

It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. And I continue to believe for grade eight it was the right thing.

I was right about Mr. Hockey.

There were days when he could just not face going and so right or wrong I let him stay at home.

In some ways he was right.

On the right this caption, “I am a Penguin. I cannot Fly in the Sky, but I can Fly in the Ocean.”

The pairing, a son and his father, right before us was conversing in either Mandarin or Cantonese.
She was a fairly young and attractive blonde woman but I was impressed right away.

A3.7 **New: Incidences 18, Old: Incidences 7**

A3.7.1 **New**

I had a new born baby and Eldest Son needed to become much more independent quickly.

The stress of dressing a two year old and a new born to put them in the car to drive less than five minutes to the school was too much for me.

In one of those strange coincidences unique to the experience of the nomads of the Canadian mining industry the only person we knew in our new community in Quebec (Population 10,000. There was a mall and a Zeller’s!) was another one of Madame La Tante’s and Rascal’s mother’s sisters.

After the initial interminable filing of documents that proved indeed we were Canadians educated in English I made an appointment to meet with the new teacher.

In fact when I started school in September of 1956 it was, albeit a one room school, into a brand new school.

As fate would have it, that summer we moved to Newfoundland and a chance for a new beginning.

Perhaps it was, I thought to myself, because it was new and full of sizing but he had refused to wear the white cotton dress shirt that had been actually required and the best I could do was get him a polo shirt that was of a type of material similar to the tee shirts he was accustomed too.

I let him wear his regular shoes and take the new shoes and someone else would have to conduct the shoe negotiation.

Further Middle Son left a new pair of black shoes at the Arts and Culture Centre last night, I wonder if you could have a look for them.”

We moved into the nicest house we ever lived in our new community in British Columbia’s Northern Interior.

It was pretty unsubtle taunting, ‘fatso’, ‘piggy-boy’ and a new one that Middle Son considered untrue, despite his slight accent and identifying vernacular, ‘Newfie’.
When the residential school closed the high school was reinvented under a new name as the Catholic high school.

It had had a Christian brother as a principal up until the year we arrived and there was a new civilian principal.

The new civilian principal had a difficult task at hand.

It was attractive to new Canadians, in particular Italians, Portuguese and Pilipinos who took their Catholic faith somewhat more seriously than those of us who are part of the lapsed generation.

That spring I had a new employment situation presented to me that at the time felt like the opportunity of a life time.

Middle Son’s beloved high school was closing anyway and he would have to find a new school for grade twelve in any case.

We thought it was good transitioning into independence for Eldest Son and an opportunity for a new beginning for Middle Son and Daughter.

A3.7.2 Old

His coach did not speak any English and now at the ripe old age of six he was the translator.

I walked into the French school and despite the fact that the building was probably 20 to 30 years old the school itself was immaculate.

But the Halloween Party the previous year was held in the Old School, it was the same school that my father had attended.

There were the old fashioned wooden seats that were bolted in rows to the floor, seats and desks attached; the seat could fold up when you got up.

Although only Eldest Son had been in school in Quebec back in Ontario because of maternelle/junior kindergarten all three kids were old enough for school.

The first civilian principal had lasted three years and had been replaced partly in response to the teachers’ unionization and partly as a result of the fact that the old Brother supporters just never got over it, whatever it was.

In any case Mr. Newcomer was in place when this story takes place as one of the old nemeses for Middle Son returned in grade eleven in the person of the physical education teacher.
Happy: 16 Incidences, Sad: 1 Incidence

A3.8.1 Happy

Eldest Son remained a happy child willingly going off to school.

She was quite pleased with Eldest Son’s progress, he was a happy child, he seemed to be picking up French, she made him a tape with some vocabulary on it and she would like him to listen to it and practice the words.

Eldest Son was happy at school.

Never mind the mistaken identity between me and the sitter, the fact of the matter is the person who truly deserved the apology was a cheerful, happy, social, bilingual six year old butterfly.

She was put in a room with two very happy cheerful therapists who had her do a number of tasks, putting pegs in holes, catching a ball, rolling on the floor and the like.

He was happy if not academically challenged.

Daughter was not happy with her classroom and was horrified one day when the teacher marked her absent when she had been present.

I did notice in the grade four choir that he was looking around and had trouble getting up and down the riser but he appeared to know the words to the songs and seemed quite happy out there.

I did raise a few issues around teasing with Mr. Shared or Mr. Hockey and they seemed to deal with it as best they could but I sensed Middle Son was not happy.

She was not happy but she was not completely miserable either but she was not having a normal school life either.

She told me that Middle Son’s case had been discussed in faculty council and although they truly felt that Middle Son was very happy in this school and the best thing that could be done was to leave him in this school truthfully they could not accommodate his academic learning needs.

You could see he was so happy.

I was quite happy with this as it seemed like she was being included.

Daughter was not particularly happy at her school.

About twenty minutes later the two emerged and Middle Son seemed quite happy.
For the first time in her entire life Daughter had a best friend, she had a circle of friends and she was happy in school.

A3.8.2 Sad

I did make it clear to him though that he would not be seeing Rascal again and that Rascal’s parents were likely to be very sad.

A3.9 Particular: Incidences 15, General: Incidences 3

A3.9.1 Particular

We were not confident enough in his skills or ours to take that particular plunge.

Does it not seem odd that of all the subjects religion is the one that had the special scribbler with this particular format?

If I have not solved this particular cultural mystery at least I know why Mr. Whiskers looked so good at seventeen, sixteen years ‘en plastique’.

As luck would have it on this particular day in late February I had gone home.

I said that I had not heard from Mrs. Bright and that his teacher last year Mrs. Known had not had any particular issues with Middle Son.

Daughter had continued attending the Children’s Resource Centre programmes and Mrs. Known had no particular complaint.

For Eldest Son in particular it must have felt like being Bill Murray in Groundhog Day.

Suffice it to say the issues of the behaviour of those on strike had been discussed openly in our house and from a particular perspective.

There was no lack of opportunity over the subsequent years for them to use this particular empowerment.

Each parent was to be given five minutes but there was no regulation of the time taken by any particular parent and some line ups were an hour or more long.

I began to appreciate the merits of that system on this particular evening, waiting, waiting and waiting.
She did seem to have one particular tormenter in her class a big freckled faced boy but Daughter always had a pretty sharp tongue and she could take care of herself.

It was attractive to new Canadians, in particular Italians, Portuguese and Filipinos who took their Catholic faith somewhat more seriously than those of us who are part of the lapsed generation.

As I previously mentioned the faculty council, and this particular teacher was a long serving member, essentially ran the school.

This particular girl also had a wide circle of other friends and she introduced Daughter to them to and she seemed to fit like a glove in the group.

A3.9.2 General

He said that he gave the class a general interest evaluation test and Middle Son scored the highest at 78%.

By the time grade nine came around I was uncertain what to do but I rationalized to myself that if we had stayed in Newfoundland he wouldn’t have gone to a regular high school until grade ten and so I thought we would stick with this arrangement one more year even though in grade nine he would be in the general school population, with no Mr. Hockey as sanctuary.

Despite the general reputation that residential schools have many First Nations parents who had gone to the school themselves chose to send their children to this school.

A3.10 Normal: Incidences 11, Abnormal: Incidences 0

A3.10.1 Normal

Then he went back to school and everything seemed to be returning to normal as we shopped at The Bay for soon- to- be- needed snow suits and wondered if we could squeeze another year out of ski boots

These suspicions were however unfounded as the jaundice proved to be normal baby jaundice but the hospitalization was one week because of the jaundice levels.

I was trying so hard to hold ‘normal’ together. We were a normal family doing normal things.

For us there was never to be normal, only survival.

She was not happy but she was not completely miserable either but she was not having a normal school life either.
We all reclaimed a little tiny bit of normal.

I took Daughter to West Secondary School and she met with the counsellor selected her courses and except for continuing in Essentials mathematics was registered as a normal student.

The temperature was a little cooler than normal for Vancouver and there was frost on the ground.

Mrs. Minecaller immediately gained my attention and respect when she forthwith told him that using a mocking voice when repeating someone else’s conversation was in itself disrespectful and that if he wanted to be heard he was to report Mrs. Retiring’s conversations in a normal voice.
A.4 Incidences of Parent School Interactions

1. I had a phone call from *Soeur* asking if Eldest Son would participate in the funeral by placing a rose on Rascal’s coffin. My husband had been asked by the family to be a pallbearer but I said ‘no’ to Eldest Son’s participation.

2. She was quite pleased with Eldest Son’s progress, he was a happy child, he seemed to be picking up French, she made him a tape with some vocabulary on it and she would like him to listen to it and practice the words.

3. Although the exercise offended my sense of what a child should be taught about gender roles I decided to cut *Madame La Tante* some slack and held my tongue.

4. At the end of the school year the *jardin* and *maternelle* parents were invited to the school for a spectacle. Eldest Son had told us that he was a duck and we had pretty clear instruction that he was to be dressed up in Sunday bests.

5. Whenever I saw her which was more likely next door rather than in some official school meeting, she remained positive about Eldest Son’s scholastics. He was learning French. He had a concept of numbers. He was pleasant, cheerful and sociable. She asked if we could begin reading to him in French and I did.

6. In his French school in Ontario the language of the playground had been English, now Ms. Scot told us in his English school in Quebec the language of the playground was French. The only concern I had was that the school was on the other side of town and for whatever reason going home for lunch was mandatory. The children were given an hour and a half for lunch but could not stay at school over the lunch hour.

7. Ms. Scot sent home a list of school supplies to purchase and I tried to recycle what he had had at the previous school. For the most part that was fine. There
was one item that I did not know what it was, I cannot remember the name now but it was a French word something like a cahier de catéchisme but I know that is not the right word. After about two weeks Ms. Scot phoned me and told me how she thought Eldest Son was doing. She observed that he did not know the phonetic alphabet in English only in French. She was not concerned about this. She noted that he could read some in French but he could not read in English. She thought though he would catch up easily. I would have to help him read at night. She would send home an extra set of the readers they were using. She thought that although his French level was adequate for the present she was concerned that he may not be able to keep up with the rest of the class as all the children were mother tongue French speakers. She suggested that we look for a tutor to provide him with some extra instruction in French. She thought it might help him make friends easier too. She noted that his printing was not neat and tidy but typical of a south paw. She asked if I had not noticed on the school supply list that text books such as readers were to be covered and that he needed a ‘that word’ for religion class. I didn’t ask what a ‘whatever it was’ was I assumed I could figure it out.

She sent the readers home.

8. A plain grey haired woman appeared and she introduced herself as Soeur Someone. I told Soeur what had happened. I said that some children from her school had ambushed my six year old grade one son on his way home from lunch. They chased him, washed his face with snow, threw snowballs at him, called him a cochon anglais and threatened that they would be waiting for him after lunch. I said that I was not too pleased that my son was so scared that he felt he had to take knives. She asked me if I knew who they were. I said that one name was Some Name and the ringleader had a manteau gris. She said that she already had a pretty good idea who they were that she would investigate and that it would not happen again. She said that this behaviour was not acceptable at her school. I left believing that she would deal with the situation.

9. I was delighted therefore to receive the invitation to take Eldest Son’s two younger siblings to school for Halloween known as Fête de Masques in secular Francophone Quebec.

10. When I got the invitation for the Quebec Halloween Party I immediately scoured Provigo and Métro for those cookies. I can’t remember if I found
them or not but to my disappointment Eldest Son brought a notice home saying I was to bring vegetables.

11. It was why I was somewhat surprised by the tone in her voice when she called me at work late in the afternoon one very sunny day in early spring. She said that the school must be advised when a student will not be returning from lunch. She said I was supposed to call or send a note. I said I wasn’t planning on not sending Eldest Son to school after lunch any day soon. She said he had not returned that day.

12. I telephoned Ms. Scot at school, told her I had found him, assured her that I would speak to him about the incident and asked her to reinforce the lesson.

13. As a working mother I couldn’t make sense of that and so I went to the Separate French school board office, spoke my very best French, found out that since I had already had a child registered in a French school in Ontario that I had French language rights and enrolled Daughter there because at the French Separate school *maternelle* was in the morning too. She did both speak and understand French, in fact she had spoken French words before she spoke English words. Her first word had been “chaude.” Both her French and mine passed muster and we were registered.

14. Two days before school started the phone rang and a woman’s voice in English surprisingly said “My name is English First Name French Last Name and I am So and So’s teacher. Since there was no So and So living at our house I said I am sorry you have the wrong number. A few minutes later the phone rang again and the same voice this time said I am Daughter’s teacher. She asked me why I had said it was the wrong number the first time. I said because she had not said Daughter’s name but that she had said another name. She said I must be off tonight because she had said the right name and I must be just not prepared for Daughter to go to school. Her remarks were quite pointed. She then gave me a list of school supplies and other instructions about bussing and the first day. It was not a good start.

15. Parent Teacher Night was from my perspective at least for the most part a non-event. Eldest Son was a very good reader, keeping up in mathematics, interested in social studies and an untidy printer and writer. Middle Son was adapting to the classroom and Mrs. Known seemed fine with his progress. Daughter understood French there was no issue there but she was having trouble with the ordinary events of the classroom like putting her shoes on. *Madame LaPointe* showed me some of Daughter’s work as compared to the
work of another child. She was not colouring in the lines. I pointed out that Daughter was an end of December baby and was even as we spoke still three years old. I was somewhat concerned after the parent teacher night.

16. I went the next morning and told Mrs. Seasoned, if not the error, the geography. She did not seem particularly embarrassed but treated me much the same as Eldest Son had the night before, like I was a ‘know it all’.

17. Shortly after Christmas I was called by Madame Lapointe and she said she continued to have concerns about Daughter’s classroom habits and her fine and gross motor skills. She told me there was a paediatric specialist associated with McMaster University coming to town and that I should make an appointment.

18. Since Madame Lapointe had requested that I see Dr. McMaster I shared the information with the school.

19. In early May I received another call from Madame Lapointe and she said she would like to have a conversation about placement of Daughter for next year. The meeting was arranged for the Board office which I found odd. I was shocked to find at least seven other people present besides me. I was shown to my seat at the table. There were eight seats, two end seats and three seats along each side. I was shown the middle seat on one of the sides. I was surrounded. I knew what this configuration meant as I had used it myself in situations where subtle intimidation might help the process along and I was not comfortable. I am not sure who all the players were that were present that day, Madame Lapointe, Soeur Principal, a couple of professionals (psychologist maybe, child and youth worker maybe), administrative professionals from the Board office et al. The conversation was in English. A woman at one of the ends of the table started to speak. She said, “Since I am the advocate for this child I will begin”. Wait I thought to myself, I am the mother shouldn’t I be the advocate for this child? She said we should listen to what Madame Lapointe had to say. Madame Lapointe said that although the child was a mother tongue English speaker she had been raised in Quebec and that language was not particularly the issue. It was not that Daughter did not understand instructions in the classroom it was that she did not follow them. Wait a minute I thought this is the same child that the Scarborough therapists had described as pleasant, cooperative and willing. She didn’t change her shoes from outdoor shoes to indoor shoes always, sometimes she didn’t flush the toilet after use, her nose was runny and she didn’t use a tissue, she couldn’t color inside the lines, she couldn’t use scissors properly, she was
larger than the other children and she didn’t seem to know the social boundaries of her space. Each person spoke about the inadequacies of Daughter as a human being at least that was what it sounded like to me. My beautiful precious child. I hadn’t recalled being asked permission to have Daughter observed in the classroom by professionals but I may have given it or maybe my permission was not necessary. Finally the gentleman, the Board administrator type, at the head of table summed up the recommendations. Daughter should next year be placed in the English Separate School as language was a complication that was not needed in this case, that she should repeat Junior Kindergarten and that there was a Children’s Resource Centre in town and that she should be treated there. In fact she could start now for the remainder of the school year, three afternoons a week as there was an opening. I was never once asked to speak or even given the courtesy of being asked my opinion. It was over and it was done. I was humiliated, embarrassed, and ashamed and by the time I got to the car weeping uncontrollably. I had been ambushed.

20. I was barely at work one morning when I received a call from the principal. He said that I needed to come to the school. He said that Middle Son had rolled in the mud. He said that I should come to his office.

21. He said that the school was very concerned about Middle Son’s behaviour. He asked me rhetorically what could possibly be the reason that a grade one student would intentionally roll in the mud? The teacher on yard duty who incidentally had been Mrs. Seasoned (you remember, provincial capitals) had said that he had intentionally rolled in the mud; he had not fallen or accidentally come upon it some other way. He said that Mrs. Bright had also said that she was having problems with Middle Son in class. He didn’t elaborate what the problems were. I said that I had shared information with the school that Middle Son had Attention Deficit Disorder. I had shared both the diagnosis documents and a psychological assessment that had been done when he was two years old. I said that I had not heard from Mrs. Bright and that his teacher last year Mrs. Known had not had any particular issues with Middle Son. He told me that the behaviour expected in a kindergarten classroom and a grade one classroom were two completely different things, and the fact that Mrs. Known had not made any comment about Middle Son’s behaviour should not be used as a guide in the present situation. He said that the truth of the matter was that the school was very concerned about the parenting style in the home. He said that based on Middle Son’s behaviour he wondered if there was any discipline in the home at all. He said he highly
recommended parenting classes. He said again that there is just no explanation for Middle Son intentionally rolling in the mud.

22. In late January I attended a Parent Teacher night. I started off in Daughter’s classroom. Mrs. Known as ever was positive and pleasant as I entered the classroom. She showed me a chair that I was supposed to sit down in. It was a kindergarten chair. I was embarrassed but I said I preferred to stand. Daughter had continued attending the Children’s Resource Centre programmes and Mrs. Known had no particular complaint. Mrs. Bright said that Middle Son was one of the better readers in the class; she just didn’t know where he had learned to read because it wasn’t in her classroom. She said that it was not that he was particularly disruptive in the classroom; it was simply that he was not engaged. He played with toys or he drew pictures. As I already knew and she reminded me the real behavioural issues were in the playground and on the school bus. He was a ‘show off’ and he was defiant. In Eldest Son’s classroom I heard about an intelligent articulate child who did not seem particularly motivated in his school work but preferred socializing to academics.

23. She had him and us sign a homework contract. We signed and I genuinely tried. I would sit with him at the kitchen table for hours on end to do maybe five arithmetic sums or write three words. He absolutely refused. In the end he would be crying, I would be crying and the whole family would be sucked into the homework vortex. One day after a several hour struggle Eldest Son grabbed the sheet and wrote the answers. The next day Mrs. Seasoned complained that the homework was too untidy. Not to be wrongfully accused of something he didn’t do Middle Son volunteered that Eldest Son had written the answer and we were in trouble again.

24. If homework was a source of conflict between teacher, student and home, it paled in comparison with other foci of Mrs. Seasoned’s attention. Whether she deliberately ignored me or had just given up on me I do not know but she chose to communicate through Eldest Son. She would say “Tell your mother to put mittens on your brother.” “Tell your mother to put snow pants on your brother.” I did put mittens on him, $25.00 worth a week. I did put snow pants on him and he would take them off and we would go on like this until time ran out in the morning. Eventually I took a change of clothes to the school and said “If Middle Son is too wet have him change.” I went into Mr. Office’s office one day with a pair of snow pants in a bag, I said “I have put them on him three times this morning if you want him to wear snow pants, you put them on him.” Mr. Office used the opportunity to point out to me that these were not the same snow pants that the other children were wearing. The snow
pants needed to be heavier and then Middle Son wouldn’t get so wet. I said that Middle Son did not find the heavier snow pants comfortable and that I would not be able to get him to wear them. I felt attacked and accused constantly. It felt like the school was not prepared to take any responsibility in this situation whatsoever. I was offended that Mrs. Seasoned and Mr. Office assumed I was so incompetent that I did not know to put mittens or snow pants on the child. I reacted to Eldest Son being the messenger. I thought it was wrong but at this stage I was so humiliated that I said nothing. The school never once showed any empathy for the challenges we faced as a family. Like everyone else they did not help. They only hurt more.

25. The final hurt came at the hands of Mrs. Seasoned. Eldest Son told me that she had gone through his and Middle Son’s lunch to see what they were eating. (For the record: a sandwich, a granola bar, a piece of fruit and a diet cola.) I suspect because Middle Son was overweight but I was never told the reason. I was shocked and felt violated. I cried, felt shame, but said nothing.

26. Late in the day about three o’clock I was called by Mr. Office. He said that Eldest Son had had an accident at school and he thought perhaps his wrist was broken. I went to the school to pick him up. However before I saw Eldest Son Mr. Office met with me and explained what had happened. He said that Eldest Son had tripped on a raised cement step at the back of the school and had fallen directly on the step with his wrist. He had been playing tag with some other kids and that no one had pushed him. He said he was surprised that such a simple fall would cause an apparent break. He said that Mrs. Bright had been the yard duty teacher. He called her in and she told exactly the same story. Finally Eldest Son was produced with his teacher holding ice to his arm. His teacher also related exactly the same story almost word for word. I was starting to wonder what had really happened.

27. The principal introduced herself as Sister Mildred. I said I had been in touch with the Assistant Superintendent and that she told us to come to school today. Sister Mildred said she had no record from the Board office that I was coming and that she would have to fit the children into classrooms and that would not be today. She said she wished the Board office would have told her. I wished they had too. She asked me if I had intended that the children were coming to school for the whole day, noting the lunch box Daughter was swaying in the direction of her brothers. I said yes. She said that when the children came back to school they were to be in uniform. I asked why the Assistant Superintendent hadn’t told me. She said because everybody knows that Catholic Schools in Newfoundland require the wearing of uniforms. Daughter
was to be in a navy tunic with a white blouse, the boys were to be in white shirts and navy pants. Light blue shirts and blouses were permissible but discouraged on choir and picture days. On gym days they were to be in navy jogging pants instead. She told me where I could buy Daughter’s tunics. I said I had had the school records forwarded to the Board office.

28. The reason I had contact with the school over this matter was because neither did I have nor could I find to purchase a red tie. My husband had a burgundy tie and I sent it to school with Eldest Son. When he came home he told me that the burgundy tie was not good enough. He said Sister Mildred said it wouldn’t do. If he was nothing else he was a conformist in his own way and so it was left to me to explain to Sister Mildred that a red tie was not available. I went to the school to discuss the tie situation and Eldest Son’s level of angst because of it with Sister Mildred. She used the opportunity to tell me about the shame of the Ontario school system not teaching children music. She found Eldest Son to be a klutz at learning the dance steps. She didn’t say it exactly like that but that was what I heard. I reminded her that he was left handed and told her I found it odd as he was part of a pairs team in dance in figure skating. She said she knew that and found it hard to believe. I found the conversation hard to believe and encouraged her to go see him skate sometime. If I am not mistaken both he and his skating partner were lefties. By some miracle they made sense of their backward world and eventually they became the Newfoundland figure skating dance champions. Secretly I too half believed he was a klutz.

29. She did not particularly make friends at school though and at some point during the year perhaps at a parent teacher night I was informed by Mrs. Kindly that the issue of Daughter’s size was one of the reasons she had not made friends. She towered over the other children and tried to bear hug them. Mrs. Kindly said that the other children were not comfortable with it. I said I would speak to Daughter. I did not think she was particularly starved for affection at home but couldn’t make sense of what I was being told. Mrs. Kindly said that even though she was not supposed to she hugged Daughter sometimes.

30. We had shared freely information regarding his diagnosis from Ontario and from his previous school. The teacher he was assigned was the wife half of a husband and wife team that taught at the school (at least that is what I thought, but during the course of this telling Middle Son advised me that although they had the same surname they were actually sister in law and brother in law). Mrs. Team was in her early sixties and therefore a very
experienced teacher. I would describe her as more no nonsense than grandmotherly but she most certainly did not have the edge of a Mrs. Seasoned. By mid October I was called to the school to meet with Mrs. Team and Sister Mildred to discuss Middle Son’s progress, make that performance, to date. Again I made the journey up the stairs past the dusty Madonna to Sister Mildred’s office. There I was greeted by Sister Mildred, Mrs. Team and a heavy set blonde woman the name of whom I did not know. Sister Mildred introduced the stranger as the Special Education teacher. Mrs. Team indicated that although Middle Son was not particularly engaged in the classroom activities he was not particularly ‘trouble’ either. He was in Newfoundland vernacular ‘a bit of a hard case’. He was reading at least at grade level or beyond, he knew more French than the rest of the class, and he was interested in social studies. The real problem she allowed was mathematics. She would begin the mathematics lesson and he would completely disengage. She was sure he hadn’t a clue. Sometimes he would take out his Game Boy and play it. She had let this go on because he was so uninvolved in the mathematics lesson that it kept his attention and he did not therefore disturb others. She had sent him to be assessed by Mrs. Specialed and the diagnosis was that he had very little mathematical skill beyond the numbers themselves and basic addition and subtraction. Together the team, I assumed the three I was meeting with, thought it was best if Middle Son was given an IEP and he would go out of the classroom and spend the 40 minutes of mathematics class with Mrs. Specialed and she would teach him mathematics one on one. At the time I never considered if this was the right thing or not. I never considered what or even knew what an IEP was. Nor was it explained to me beyond what I have just said. I never considered the harm that might be done to the child by singling him out and sending him to Mrs. Specialed. By this stage of the game I was too overwhelmed by the experts. I wanted to be seen to be cooperative. I was far too defeated for that. Basically I thought ‘Whatever,’ ‘Do what you want.’ I simply signed the paper before I left Sister Mildred’s office and it was done.

31. As I had in Quebec I attended the other school and reported the incident. Both the principal of the Catholic and Public school had conversations with students about appropriate bus stop behaviour but they were to no avail.

32. I called Sister Mildred. She did not seem to understand my point. I may be mistaken but I am pretty sure that in Newfoundland the principals are also members of the teachers union or at least beneficiaries of ‘Me too’ clauses. And so I empowered my children. I said to them that anytime a teacher discusses teachers’ union politics in the classroom you should raise your hand
and say that that topic of conversation is not an appropriate one for the
classroom. There was no lack of opportunity over the subsequent years for
them to use this particular empowerment. They all three did and each of them
on more than one occasion. Teachers should remember that they have in their
classes children like my children who may see things from a very different
perspective.

33. “Hello this is Middle Son’s mother. I was wondering if you could tell me why
Middle Son wasn’t allowed to come out with the all grades choir last night.
He was very upset and cried most of the night. He does not know why he
wasn’t allowed to come out. I did notice in the grade four choir that he was
looking around and had trouble getting up and down the riser but he appeared
to know the words to the songs and seemed quite happy out there. One thing
that you have to realize is that his heart is broken. The Christmas Concert is
for all the kids including Middle Son not just for kids like Judge’s Daughter.
If you wanted Middle Son not to be part of the concert because he couldn’t
stand still then you shouldn’t have let him rehearse for the last month. It is not
fair to him that you decided he couldn’t participate last night. You owe
Middle Son an explanation as to why he wasn’t allowed to participate. I will
not drop this until Middle Son has an explanation. Further Middle Son left a
new pair of black shoes at the Arts and Culture Centre last night, I wonder if
you could have a look for them.”

34. I was called by Sister Mildred on the telephone. She wanted to discuss the
academic progress of Daughter. I said sure I would come to the school. This is
where I am not able to remember exactly the circumstances. It may have been
the year that Daughter was in grade four. Mr. Laidback was her teacher. I
remember that I had gone to the Parent Teachers Night and that he had shown
me the untidy state of Daughter’s desk as compared to the other children’s. He
showed me too her inabilities to print or write neatly like the other children.
He was not someone that had a high degree of angst around it and all the
showing of the inadequacy of Daughter was done in quite a non chalant
fashion. (Perhaps it is an aside and perhaps it is not but he himself had a
brother who was brain injured in some way, again I don’t remember all the
circumstances but the brother had been hired in one of the units that reported
to me at my place of employment on some kind of job training programme.) It
was around this time that Sister Mildred wanted to talk to me. I went to her
office. She started to make the suggestion that Daughter too should perhaps be
given and IEP. I had just come off some sort of dealing with Middle Son again
and I reacted to the suggestion. I said no. They should try harder with
Daughter. I did not give my permission for anything. I think I was crying.
Finally Sister Mildred said that maybe the best thing for the meantime was to just leave us alone.

35. She came home and told me about it and I was outraged and felt empathy for her but I was probably travelling or too busy or something and I did not contact the school.

36. In any case the next morning he called the principal. He told her what had happened and he insisted on meeting with the physical education teacher. She arranged for this for the afternoon. He went to the school and he met with both the principal and the teacher. He said to the teacher “I do not do this for Middle Son. I do this for the next child. Middle Son is valued at home. We are all proud of what we look like and who we are in our house. Besides he didn’t understand the remark that was made yesterday so in some way there is no harm done. However, as a teacher you should be held at least to the standard that I am held to at the mine as a supervisor of men. I can tell you that if I made a remark to a man at the mine the same as you made to Middle Son yesterday I would be fired and I would deserve to be. I know that nothing will happen to you but what you said is not acceptable in the working world although it is apparently acceptable in the teaching world. If I had my way you would be held to the same standard that I am held to at the mine. I just wanted you to know that.” The physical education teacher attempted to apologize. My husband said that he neither deserved an apology nor was he prepared to forgive. He told me later he saw tears in the teacher’s eyes. But he didn’t care he just left.

37. Eldest Son whom each and every teacher allowed was a bright child was doing absolutely nothing in school. He was getting by with B’s and C’s but each and every teacher told me he was doing nothing but coasting. When I got to the French teacher I was completely demoralized, a once fluently bilingual child was doing nothing and was just scraping by in French too.

38. For whatever reason, perhaps because it crossed two school years it was Mrs. Related who shared the results with me and not the classroom teacher. (Sister Mildred had retired at the end of the previous year and had been replaced by Mr. Moustache). Mrs. Related told me that the school was very concerned about Daughter’s results. The tests showed that Daughter was reading and comprehending at a grade twelve level and was writing at a kindergarten level. She seemed to be looking to me for the solution to this contradictory puzzle. “How can that be?” she said. She seemed to be blaming Daughter,
perhaps I did too. She just won’t write properly. What’s wrong with her? What’s wrong with this picture?

39. I visited the school the week before classes started and explained to the Vice Principal, who shared a surname with a close mining friend of ours that I wished to send Middle Son to a junior high school rather than a full fledged high school because I was concerned about his maturity level. I explained too about his A.D.D. and his issues at school. Mr. Shared told me that I was welcome to send Middle Son to this school but that transportation would be my responsibility and he even thought that he had the best placement for him in a programme called Transitions Eight. He said the programme was for kids just like Middle Son who needed an extra year to transition into high school. Instead of the rotary class scheduling the Transition Eight students had the same teacher for all academic subjects but participated with all other students in classes such as shop or physical education. Mr. Shared said the class size was quite small about twelve to fourteen. He said it was mostly boys but there were some girls. I asked him if Transitions Eight was another name for a dumping ground for behavioural problems. He said no that I should meet the Transitions Eight teacher and see what I thought. He took me to the Transitions Eight classroom. He introduced me to the teacher. He was a very young looking man wearing a short sleeved white shirt who had the same name as a famous hockey player. He said he traded on the name sometimes with the kids, they thought it was cool his name was famous. I talked to Mr. Hockey for probably an hour about the school challenges of Middle Son. He seemed enthusiastic, authentic and very caring and I could also tell that Middle Son would really like him and so it was that Middle Son was registered in a downtown junior secondary school in Transitions Eight.

40. After about three weeks I had a conversation with Mr. Hockey about Middle Son’s progress. Mr. Hockey said Middle Son is so polite. “He calls me Sir” he said. (I didn’t want to shatter the illusion and tell him that it was five years of training by nuns and habit not a sign of politeness at all). He said that he gave the class a general interest evaluation test and Middle Son scored the highest at 78%. It was things like basic Canadian geography, history and identification of some literary works. Mr. Hockey was impressed. He was aware that Middle Son was not very advanced though in either Mathematics or Science but since the mode of the class was that the students worked at their own pace he felt he would manage. I asked him if Middle Son was making friends. He said no but that Middle Son did quite often stay after school and talk to him about any number of topics from technology to politics and so he felt he was connecting.
41. I did raise a few issues around teasing with Mr. Shared or Mr. Hockey and they seemed to deal with it as best they could but I sensed Middle Son was not happy.

42. The principal who shared a surname with a cartoon character called me. Dr. Character told me what had happened. He more or less told me the story that I have related above. He told me I should come pick Middle Son up as he had been given a four day suspension. When I got to the school Middle Son was in the company of the Vice Principal, Mr. Shared. Middle Son was white as a sheet and had clearly been crying. Both Dr. Character and Mr. Shared told me that they were aware of the teasing that had been going on. They admitted that Middle Son had ‘snapped’ because of it. They talked to him and to me about not solving things with violence, but they did not particularly give either of us much confidence that they would be able to deal with the tormenting of Middle Son. They did tell him that his actions could have resulted in criminal charges. The seat mate was suspended for the same length of time.

43. I was called to the school and I met with the principal, (a petit blonde woman), Mr. Tall and I was introduced to the special education teacher, Mrs. Needle (her true surname always makes me think of sewing). They suggested that Daughter needed to have a modified program in both English and Mathematics, that her writing output was very poor and illegible, and that she lacked social skills and that she was having a difficult time interacting with peers. They suggested that she be sent to Mrs. Needle in a group of four students that were having trouble in reading and writing and that she be sent for one on one instruction in mathematics. I didn’t put up any resistance to the notion at all. I signed whatever paper work was necessary and it was done again.

44. But Mrs. Petit called me and asked that I come and meet with Mr. Tall and Mrs. Needle. They met me in Mr. Tall’s classroom. They sat together on two student chairs and I stood. Again I did not hear one positive word about Daughter from either of them. Mrs. Needle complained that Daughter dominated the group reading sessions. She answered all the questions before the others had a chance and she was very opinionated about the readings. She did not find this appropriate in a remedial reading group at all. Her writing output continued to be poor and illegible and she didn’t seem to be making any effort to improve it. Mr. Tall likewise had nothing positive to say. Daughter had very poor peer interactions. She seemed to have a chip on her shoulder and he constantly had to break up disputes mostly with her regular
tormenter but with others too. They suggested that perhaps Daughter was a bully. It crossed my mind that the two who sat comfortably before me seemed to fit more accurately my definition of a bully. Finally any opportunity, ability or desire I had to dispute the information that I was given was completely removed by their last series of statements. They said that they thought that Daughter was not aware that she was entering puberty and that she smelled bad and needed to shower more and use deodorant. I was humiliated and left. I was crying. When I got home I told Daughter what they had said. She too was humiliated and was crying and felt a sense of betrayal so profound that I am not able to describe it to you.

45. I had been warned about this by Mr. Shared and Dr. Character as they had urged me to leave Middle Son in their school for grade ten. They said that the Catholic high school wouldn’t be able to meet his programming requirements, besides they said “We know Middle Son. We are used to him.”

46. Towards the end of grade ten the teacher who performed the duties of an academic counsellor called me and asked me to come to the school. She told me that Middle Son’s case had been discussed in faculty council and although they truly felt that Middle Son was very happy in this school and the best thing that could be done was to leave him in this school truthfully they could not accommodate his academic learning needs. She recommended that he be placed on a high school leaving programme as opposed to a high school graduation Dogwood track. He would take electives that he enjoyed: art, drama, computers things like that but no English, no mathematics and no science. Basically my agreement was a condition for allowing him to continue in this school and so I agreed.

47. I bumped into the drama teacher in front of the grocery store about a week after the show. I told him who I was and congratulated him on the show and thanked him for giving Middle Son a chance. He said that he had his moments with Middle Son but that he and all the other kids had risen to the occasion and he was very proud of everyone’s efforts.

48. In the spring that Middle Son was in grade eleven I ran into his art teacher one day in the aisles of Overwaitea between coffee and pasta. She was a very enthusiastic, kindly woman and she had encouraged him greatly. He even spoke of her in collective terms, “me and Mrs. Coffee/Pasta, we artists.” I know her class was a kind of sanctuary for him. She told me that she really enjoyed teaching him that they had great conversations about politics and art and just about everything else, and that he had grown greatly including a level
of self-awareness and insight. (I must admit that the authenticity of her remarks was greatly elevated as the conversation was taking place in Overwaitea and not at a parent teacher night where I was bracing myself for the inevitable "But"). She told me that she had recently sent home his art portfolio and she asked me if I had looked through it. I said I had not. She told me I should ask him to show it to me. She said that she thought he had done some really good work including a piece that she found quite moving.

49. I had learned by this time in these cases it was best to strike first and so I called the school and spoke to Mr. Newcomer. When I told him what had happened I heard a very good natured laugh on the end of the phone. He said he would speak to Middle Son and the physical education teacher.

50. A few years later when I met him on a social occasion Mr. Friend told me that she was one of the brightest students he ever had.

51. I phoned the teacher and told her that I did not think this was an appropriate way to assign groups.

52. The next morning I called Daughter’s school. I can’t remember if I asked for or was referred to a Vice Principal. I told her my story and she said the school would conduct an investigation.

53. At the end of the second day after the incident I received a phone call from the Vice Principal. She told me that the school had investigated and that they were satisfied that they had found those responsible. They did not anticipate that there would be further incidences and that if there were that Daughter should let them know.

54. The next morning I went to the school and I went straight to the Drama room. I found the Drama teacher. There were several kids in the room but I didn’t care. I first started in a soft gentle voice and told him who I was. I told him what Daughter had been subjected at the hands of Seven Syllables. I said that neither Daughter nor I was upset at the fact that she wasn’t going to the Festival but that what I at least was upset at was the assignment she had been given by Seven Syllables. He began to offer some excuse that he didn’t know what I was talking about and that it was essentially a student run project. By this time I was both shouting and crying. It told him “I don’t care, you were the adult in charge and therefore I will be holding you responsible. This room was once sanctuary for Daughter now it is a hell hole.” He was looking embarrassed and he sheepishly said that he would investigate. My next stop was the Vice Principal’s office, the same one that I had dealt with the previous
fall. I told what had happened and what I had said to the Drama teacher. She too said she would investigate.

55. She said that the school counsellor was proposing mediating a discussion between Daughter and Seven Syllables. I did not approve as I did not see what there was to be mediated but Daughter did seem comfortable with the proposal for mediation so I said nothing. I felt that there would be an unequal power relationship (the mere fact of a grade nine verses a grade twelve if nothing else) in such a mediation and that Seven Syllables needed to learn a lesson from the incident and that mediation in which it would be assumed that Daughter accept part of the blame was not appropriate. But I said nothing.

56. I took Middle Son to East Secondary School. Although Daughter had gone in on her own, Middle Son wanted me to go with him, and I wanted to as well. We went into the school and sat in a lineup with other parent/student combinations. The pairing, a son and his father, right before us was conversing in either Mandarin or Cantonese. The counsellor came out of the office and approached them. The son said “My dad does not speak English but he has a few questions.” They were also fiddling in their hands with some official looking documents. They all three then disappeared back into the counsellor’s office I assumed answering dad’s questions. After about twenty minutes or so they came out. The counsellor held a file folder with Middle Son’s name on it and came towards us. He introduced himself. By his name at least he was also coincidently Italian. Mr. Coincident showed us to his office but before we reached the door Middle Son had clearly changed his mind about my participation. He blocked the door and said to me “I want to do this myself, I don’t want you.” I kept heading in the office. He became more forceful and Mr. Coincident said that it was okay he would meet with him alone. I was embarrassed and sat in the waiting room. About twenty minutes later the two emerged and Middle Son seemed quite happy. Mr. Coincident asked about where records could be obtained as the previous school had closed. I suggested either the parish office or the school that Middle Son had indicated as his choice in the former community and we left.

57. He saw the principal and yelled at him that the conditions of the sidewalk were not safe and that he’d better do something.

58. The next morning early Middle Son and I camped out side Mrs. Minecaller’s office. She arrived eventually, noted that we did not have appointment, but I told her we wanted to talk to her anyway and she accommodated us. She was a fairly young and attractive blonde woman but I was impressed right away. I
told her that she had called my husband at the mine that he was very concerned and that we wanted to understand what the call was about. She said that she did not know that my husband was at the mine and that he had never offered that to her in the conversation, that they had tried my office but had not gotten through and so they called his place of employment which was a local number. I explained to her that it was a satellite number. She said she had noticed a delay but assumed he had her on a headset or speaker phone. We then got to the heart of the matter. She said that Mrs. Retiring had reported that Middle Son had written a threatening letter. I asked her if she had seen the letter. She said she had not. I said that I had seen the letter and that it was not threatening. It was not nice but it did not contain a threat. I asked Middle Son where the letter was now. He was not sure if he still had it or not. We looked through his book bag but did not find it. I asked him if he had given the letter to anyone. He said he had shown it to his friend but that he had not given it to him. Mrs. Minecaller then asked Middle Son to tell why he had written the letter in the first place, leaving aside for the moment the issue of whether the letter was threatening or not. Middle Son said that Mrs. Retiring did not treat him appropriately. He said that she did not respect him as a person or as an artist. He then said some of the things she had said to him. When he did so, he threw his voice into a whiny tone. Mrs. Minecaller immediately gained my attention and respect when she forthwith told him that using a mocking voice when repeating someone else’s conversation was in itself disrespectful and that if he wanted to be heard he was to report Mrs. Retiring’s conversations in a normal voice. He continued but she had to remind him a couple of more times. In the end Mrs. Minecaller proposed a meeting between Mrs. Retiring and Middle Son. She said, “At this school we do not leave issues unresolved.” I was again impressed. I was also very impressed with Middle Son. He said immediately, “I will not meet with her without an advocate present.” I thought to myself now there is a kid who has been around the block a few times. Mrs. Minecaller thought that the idea of an advocate was a good one. We discussed who the advocate might be. I think Middle Son suggested Mr. Coincident or the learning centre officer. Either was agreeable to Mrs. Minecaller and we left.