

Perspectives of Single Mothers and their Relationship with the Staff
at their Children's School: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

The current educational discourse in Canada suggests that parents should be involved in their children's education. The expectations for the specific level and type of parental involvement are often shaped by the school, which cements the school as the dominant partner in this relationship. In light of the increasingly diverse nature of families, there is an urgent need to deconstruct the school structures that shape parental involvement.

The depiction of the 'family' is normative: two-parent homes are the acceptable standard. Single parents deviate from the norm, and are therefore perceived as 'outsiders' and/or 'failures' that require 'charitable' support. This perception is cause for a deconstruction of the school system as it dominates parental involvement norms. Using poststructuralism, the deconstruction or pulling apart of the inequitable layers of the school system is the first step to identifying the areas of unitary subjectivity and language that educators in public schools are consciously or unconsciously dictating.

This narrative inquiry is designed to understand the lives that single mothers live and, specifically, their relationship with their children's schools. This study will address: 1) What are the experiences of single mothers in the Manitoba public school system? (2) How do these experiences impact their collaborative relationships with their children's school? (3) How can school staff reshape their operations to increase collaboration with single mothers? Study findings suggest that educators take the necessary steps to deconstruct their discourse around lives that single mothers live, striving to create equity in family partnerships.

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I want to thank my three participants: Robyn, you made several attempts to support your son by meeting with school staff and offering your professional suggestions. As a principal, I felt frustrated to hear that you were being marginalized and alienated. Sarah, your story had the largest personal impact on me. Listening to you share your story about racing to school to scoop up your kids in fear of your ex -partner taking them without permission, was identical to my experience as a child. I knew what this felt like as a child, I was now able to hear the anxiety, worry, and anger from a mother. Tara, your experiences broke my heart, particularly your account of moving from home to home, and your recollection of being displaced due to lack of heating during a Manitoba winter. To hear these stories, as expressed to me with a tone of frustration but also with a degree of complacency prompted me to think of my own mother and her resilient attitude to systems that sustain a status quo. This example reminded me again of why as educators we MUST be willing to provide opportunity in a safer, trusting environment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Narrative Beginnings

My earliest memories of my family involve fear, abandonment, anger, sadness, and the need for control. In 1987, at the age of 8 living in a two story side by side in Winnipeg, Manitoba, I would regularly sneak out of bed to sit unnoticed at the top of the stairs to listen to the language and threats our father would speak towards our mother. I always needed music or television to help me fall asleep in order to avoid hearing the violence. I would hear yelling, screaming, hitting, and dishes crashing. Fortunately, my younger brother who was only 5 years old would be sleeping in his own bed but I was still worried about what was going to happen to our family. I knew when these altercations were finished that I would hear our father apologize profusely to our mother as he wept. During those moments, I would feel a rush of emotional relief. The violence had subsided for the time being.

I cannot recall the exact age but when I was 7 or 8 years old, my mother, brother, and I made multiple trips to women's shelters for safety. There came a point shortly after these stays at the women's shelters that our mother finally had the courage to take us boys, in the middle of the night, to a friend's house where we would spend a couple of weeks living in safety. Now, as a married father, I still do not understand why our mother chose to stay with our father during this abusive relationship. I realize now that unless one has lived as the person who is abused, an outsider will not fully understand why it is so common for abused women to stay in the relationship.

Though our mother had left an abusive relationship, she still had children who, at the time, wanted to see their father. This resulted in further abusive altercations from our father towards our mother. For example, 2-3 years after our mother began to put the pieces to her life back together, our father made an unannounced visit to church one Sunday morning. He was upset that I did not want to see him that weekend on his scheduled visit. My reason was that I had had enough of living in two homes, still witnessing violent outbursts from him (now towards my brother) and his ongoing complaints about our mother. I can still recall walking out of the church service into the corridor and seeing my father standing there. The instant fear that came across my body froze me. All of a sudden, he came up to my mother, verbally assaulted her in public, and then kicked her from behind so hard that she fell to the ground. I stood there sobbing, but only for a quick second. I wanted to cry longer, but knew I needed to console my brother who was scared. I then helped our mother up off the floor. The anger I felt at that moment as a 10-year-old child filled my body with hatred towards our father. This hatred took decades for me to forgive and move forward from. Soon after the incident at church, our mother had a restraining order placed on our father that stated he could not come within 500 yards of her, unless he was picking up his children during scheduled visitation times. At this point, at 10 years old, I ended my relationship with our father. One year later, so did my brother. When I was 11 years of age, we finally began living as a family of three, my mother, brother, and I.

In the years that followed, living as the oldest child being raised by a single mother certainly had its challenging moments. Prior to the divorce, I only wanted to attend school to play soccer at recess and hang out with friends. Post-divorce, my dislike for school grew stronger. What I recall being the most frustrating thing about school was the disconnect between the school and what my life was like living in an abusive home, and without a father.

Our mother had challenges finding affordable childcare for my brother and I so she was able to work. I recall at the ages of 7 or 8 waking up at 5:30 am to get dressed and walk with our mother 2 kilometers to our babysitter's house. In the winter months our mother would pull us on the sled to our babysitter's, drop us off, then she would walk another kilometer to the public transits and travel 45 minutes by bus to work. We would walk to school at 8:30 am and walk back to our babysitter's after school at 4:15 pm. We would wait at our babysitter's until our mother came to pick us up around 6:00 pm to walk us back home. We would repeat this routine daily. It was difficult, but the strength of our mother kept our family going.

We only received one cheque in fifteen years as alimony payment. Our mother provided everything we had on her own. Our mother knew that this was probably going to be the only cheque we were going to receive because of the court battle between her and our father. She decided to take my brother and me out for dinner, buy us some new shoes (expensive ones too), and enjoy having "extra money". Some might think that she should have

saved this money, but I would have celebrated the same way if I were in her position. We felt happy that night and we had not felt that happy in years.

Living close to the poverty line became a reality at the age of 12. At the time, I wanted all the things my friends had, new clothes, bikes, and toys. I knew at the time there was no way our mother could afford to buy me these items, and it frustrated me because I was always on the fringe of being apart of the "in crowd" of friends at school. As a result, I decided to find a job delivering newspapers on two large routes delivering approximately 50-60 newspapers. The money was great but the challenge was waking up at 6:00 am to begin delivering newspapers, and each paper was to be delivered by 7:00 am. I recall falling asleep numerous times at school sitting at my desk. As I mentioned the money was great to have but the cost was lack of sleep. With this money, I would purchase my clothes, toiletry items, and any other items outside of shelter and food, which my mother provided with her job as a Ward Clerk at a hospital. She has told me more recently that we had \$20 left on her pay cheque after paying for the mortgage (we lived in a small condo), food, transportation, and outstanding lawyer bills.

There is an emotional toll that our mother had to pay after leaving our father and starting new as a single mother. As the oldest child, I was parentified at 10 years of age and was often an emotional support for my mother. We had conversations about the challenges that she faced in the workplace. These were conversations that would normally take place with a husband or partner. These were challenges and life skills that I was learning

as a child that most children do not have an opportunity to learn. The teachers in my school, however, saw me only as a student who did not like academics. The school never adjusted their programming to meet my needs or develop my strengths. As I got older and began attending middle school and high school, my hatred towards academics grew. However, I realized by Grade 11, that I needed to comply with the school's academic expectations or I was not going to graduate.

The realization that I wanted to become a teacher came during these difficult high school years. During these difficult times, I recall the memories of my Grade 6 teacher, which revolved around the "extra" time that he would spend with me during his lunch hour. We would play badminton together for the entire lunch hour, a couple times per week. He never treated me as the troubled kid from a single parent even though I did like to cause trouble. He knew my behaviour problems were not because our single mother was raising me. He knew that I was seeking a positive male relationship and he met that need for me. As a school principal now I try to provide students exactly what my Grade 6 teacher provided me.

I have parents in my school who act as a voice for their child if their child is not feeling supported by their teacher. Over the years, there has been particular demographic of parents that tend to contact me. They are mostly parents of two-parent homes who have established social capital as members of the larger community and of the school community. These parents take the initiative to voice concerns regarding their child's education. It is very

apparent to me that the students who receive the most individualized education to meet their needs are the children from families who approach the school. Rarely does the school create opportunities for all parents to voice their concerns in a variety of mediums.

My mother's level of social capital was relatively low compared to the other parents of the students in my classes. I was one of very few children who were from a single-parent home. In the school I attended in the 1980's in Winnipeg, Manitoba, there were only 1 or 2 students in a grade who lived in a single parent home. Fortunately, our mother had a daytime job and was able to attend parent-teacher interviews in the evening to introduce herself to my teacher. She rarely socialized with other adults who were married with children. She socialized with other single mothers who had similar experiences in their personal lives and with whom she could connect. I recall being sent home from school for "fighting" in the hallways. Another boy threw me up against a locker in a play-fighting manner. At that moment a Grade 7 teacher came around the corner and told us to go to the office. I had not thrown a punch, I had not even thrown the other student up against the locker, but we were officially suspended. My mother was not happy with the school's decision and called the school to speak to the male principal. Our mother was even angrier when she got off the phone. She felt that if she were a male father calling the school, questioning the school's decision, the principal would not have brushed *him* off in the way he did our mother.

A similar memorable experience took place when I was trying out for a provincial soccer team. I was clearly one of the top players on our community club team, which was one of the top teams in the province. I did not make the team somehow during the selection process. That night I could hear my mother speaking to another parent who was shocked that I did not make the team, saying, “well, if he had a father who was part of the boys’ club of fathers petitioning to get their sons on the provincial team, Colin would be on this team.” This was the second time I had heard her speak of the inequalities she faced as a single mother, but this was the first time this phenomenon sunk in for me. I realized that our family was going to be treated differently.

Currently, as a school principal, I have quickly come to realize that my story is similar to many other children I see and to whom I talk on a regular basis. They are disengaged in school because schools are not serving each student’s specific needs. It is because I know that disengagement is often related to educators’ inability to relate to the personal life circumstances of children who do not fit a normative standard that I want to conduct this research. But, mostly it is because of the love I have for our mother, and the admiration I have for her courage amidst the struggles she faced that I want to conduct this research. She may have been unable to contribute to my school life in the same way as other parents could, but her support for her children was, and continues to be, utterly selfless. Educators need to take a lesson from this, and develop collaborative practices with

single mothers who may not be able to contribute in conveniently normative ways. And judge not, lest ye be judged.

As I wrote the above experiences around this research topic in August 2015, I came to realize that my narrative was similar to the current disconnect in the relationship between educators and families. Our family experienced challenges that had an impact on my mother at work and my brother and I at school. I do not recall the teachers that I experienced as a student showing interest in my life away from school. When I am referring to showing interests, I mean understanding me deeper than knowing I liked to play sports. I mean understanding my background, and showing interest in my family makeup and how it contributes to my schooling. Further, my mother's relationship with the school staff I attended was for the most part reactive and not proactive. As I shared earlier, phone calls from the school to my mother were made only for disciplinary reasons and school attendance. This disconnect that my family experienced, speaks to the current discourse in education with the school deciding how the family school relationship will work.

Coming to My Research Puzzles

This study examines the current relationship between single mothers and public schools. The current educational discourse in Canada suggests that parents should be involved in their children's education (Dempsey *et al.*, 2005; Epstein, 2011). The expectations for the specific level and type of parental involvement are often shaped by the school, which cements the school as the dominant partner in this relationship. For example, Hornby (2011) defines this school dominance model as an "expert model" for parental involvement where "professionals regard themselves as experts on all aspects of

the development and education of children while parents views are accorded little credence” (p. 27). This unbalanced relationship negatively affects non-traditional families, such as single mothers. The school is positioned to be in control of this relationship and single mothers are expected to be compliant with school decisions and initiatives. The nature of the relationship between families and school staff must extend beyond this current educational practice and consider the increasingly plurality of family backgrounds and their personal and professional lives if school staff/parent relationships are to be effective. In attempt to unpack the term collaboration, I will use Linda Hill's (2014) description for collaboration, “the ability to generate ideas through discourse and debate” (p. 100). Linda Hill (2014) is the lead author of the article *Collective Genius*. She discusses three areas needed to innovate organizational practice. These capabilities are creative abrasion, creative agility, and creative resolution. What is foundational to Hill's (2014) framework is the attention to including each individual's discourse during the collaboration process.

This study will respond to the following research puzzles: (1) What are the experiences of single mothers in the Manitoba public school system? (2) How do these experiences impact their collaborative relationships with their children's school? (3) How can school staff reshape their operations to increase collaboration with single mothers? These questions will guide an inquiry into the lives of single mothers in a Manitoba school and the promotion of a school system change that takes into account the lived realities of single mothers.

Background for the Study

North American schools struggle to improve the involvement of parents in their children's education. Research suggests that parental involvement contributes to the success of a child's education (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005). Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, emphasizes that, "in study after study, teachers, parents, administrators, and even students from elementary through high school say that parental involvement benefits students, improves schools, assists teachers, and strengthens families" (Epstein, 2011, p. 3). She further explains that a shared responsibility for education means "coordination, cooperation, and complementarity of school and families and encourages communication and collaboration between the two institutions" (Epstein, 2011, p. 26). Educators try to foster collaboration by opening their doors to parents to volunteer in classrooms, hosting a 'meet your teacher' evening, providing space for parent-teacher interviews, encouraging communication via phone calls, creating parent councils, writing reflective progress reports in students' agendas, and sending newsletters home. The above examples are perceived by educators as a commonplace approach to support parental involvement in the classrooms (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2005). Although these steps may be helpful toward facilitating parental involvement to a certain degree, oftentimes this structure is determined and driven by the school administrators and teachers. Parents have little input into how their involvement can be made more meaningful and accessible in light of their work and life contexts. Pointedly, little consideration is given to the

diverse backgrounds of parents, such as, class, ethnicity, and gender (Hornby, 2011). All these attributes can affect the ways in which parents are able to engage with schools.

Family diversity consists of more than a mother, father, and child as a nuclear unit. Diverse families are becoming increasingly visible in Canadian societies. For example, Statistics Canada (2011) states that only 39% of couples have children at home. This includes (but is not limited to) blended families (step and biological parents and siblings), intergenerational families (grandparents, parents and children in a single household), same-sex parent families, immigrant or refugee parents, domestic partnership (unmarried parents), and single parent (single mothers and single fathers). For example, in Canada the number of common-law couples grew rapidly by 13.9% since 2006 compared to a 3.1% increase for married couples and an 8% rise for single-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2011). Furthermore, most children live with married parents (63.6%), common-law parents (16.3%) or lone (19.3%) parents, while 0.8% of children lived with other relatives or non-relatives (Statistics Canada, 2011). These numbers clearly indicate the diversity of Canadian families. Educators need to critically consider how to cultivate parental collaboration in accordance with a changing landscape of family backgrounds.

In light of the increasingly diverse nature of families, there is an urgent need to deconstruct the school structures that shape parental involvement. Deconstruction refers to the pulling apart and analyzing of discourse including language, power, and subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). Weedon (1987) explains deconstruction and the intended use of this critical practice:

It arises out of a fundamental critique of humanist discourses and their conceptions of subjectivity and language. It rejects unitary intentional subjectivity, locating meaning in texts and their relation with other texts, insisting that this meaning is not only plural, but constantly deferred in the never-ending webs of textuality in which all texts are located. (p. 163)

The deconstruction or pulling apart of the inequitable layers of the school system is the first step to identifying the areas of unitary subjectivity and language that educators in public schools are consciously or unconsciously dictating.

For example, educators may wish to consider monitoring the language that is used at school to describe different families and homes. This means that, as Weedon (1987) writes, “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested” (p. 21). In the case of this study, this signals a call for a social re-organization of the approaches that promote parental involvement. As an educator and a principal I have heard some of the labels used in school contexts to describe family background diversity. For example, some homes are referred to by educators, almost by default, as a “broken home”, “broken family”, or a “disadvantaged family” when it comes to single parent homes. Families may view these terms as implying that their family units have deficits, rather than possible strengths. As such, labeling a home with these terms may inhibit a parent’s motivation to communicate with the school. Educators' approaches to parental involvement need to be reconstructed with a diversity of family backgrounds in mind in order to improve the parent/school relationship with *all* families. This will require a shift in relationships of power.

Power, “inheres in difference and is a dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses, who are the agents” (Weedon, 1997, p 110). Educators can operate in a position of dominant power in a number of ways that do not reflect the interests of the diverse families in the school community. For example, the language used on school websites, newsletters, and communication home can alienate many parents. Educators should make a robust effort to communicate in the languages that families can understand. With hundreds of students in a school, the process of translation of text and clarifying educational jargon might become overwhelming and very time-consuming, but arrangements should be made for all communication to be equitably accessed by all families. The school when considering means of communication should also consider family’s accessibility to technology. Some homes may not have access to computers and internet to view school websites and online communication. If not, there will be an imbalance of power between the families that are able to understand the school’s communication and those families that are not linguistically able to understand important school information.

At times, schools request additional money from families for student programming such as field trips, transportation costs, sports jerseys, and instrument rentals. This is an example of educators using their power and influence to put families in the position to provide additional money, which they may not have. Teachers and school administration ask for parents to contribute to classroom spending for field trips, camp trips, or unique projects in classrooms that require extensive supplies. For example, published in the *Fees for Learning Materials and Activities Guidelines* (2011), the Ontario Ministry of Education has provided schools with the opportunity to charge

parents for Enhanced Programming and Materials: “For example, in some performance and production courses (for example, music, woodworking), students may wish to use a superior product or consumable than that provided by the school, in which case they may be asked to pay the additional cost of the upgrade” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 2). This is problematic for those families that are not able to afford the “superior” products to provide for their child to use at their publicly funded school. As a result, for some students to participate in these school activities, there are financial sacrifices that need to be made at home.

Additionally, school boards have preset start and end time to the school day. Older middle school and high school students who may have jobs to subsidize family income may find the rigid start and end times for school difficult to manage. As a result of schools’ rigid use of absolute power in their decision and implementation processes of education, a reconstruction of the school system in the area of collaboration with a diversified family population would benefit these students. An example of this flexibility is currently taking place in Houston, Texas. Furr High School offers a Realizing Educational Achievement in the City of Houston (REACH) program. This program offers flexible school hours during the evenings and weekends. The program is designed to support students who are working to provide finances for their families or for young teen mothers and fathers who need flexible schooling times to balance a young family and their education. Various students have expressed their gratitude for a program like REACH as the program provides them with the chance to complete their high school education (REACH Charter High School, 2015). The REACH program is a helpful example of a school diversifying the school day to collaborate with the needs of families.

Weedon (1997) states that social organizations are places where our sense of self is determined, which influences our subjectivity because “subjectivity is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced” (p. 21). Indirectly or directly, schools as a social organization position families in ways that can have an impact on how parents feel about home-school collaboration. For example, assessment results and daily schooling requirements are just two examples of how educators may sort and position parents and families. From my experience as an educator, parents whose children are more academically capable (i.e., receive 65-100% as final grades) according to provincial standards tend to be more open to collaborating with the school than the parents of students who receive grades of 64 and below. Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2005) explain that one of the reasons parents are hesitant to collaborate with their child’s school is because of the parents’ perceived level of self efficacy in academically helping their child. The daily academic requirements that parents need to provide for their child at home after school hours can also position parents according to their job hours and time in the evening to read with their child or complete outstanding homework. Two parent homes are in a stronger position to have more available time in the evenings to support their child in evening academic requirements than single parent homes.

Discursive authority is important in acquiring gender subjectivity (Weedon, 1997). An institution such as a school is positioned in society as an institution for socializing children. Educators are positioned to educate children on what are appropriate social behaviours and skills needed to be a contributing person to society. What can be problematic is teaching to what are the “normal” social behaviour and skills. For the most part, children see the adults in school as the experts of knowledge and as a result,

teaching children what is “normal” behaviour and “normal” social skills creates a confrontation for subjectivity. Restructuring schools to have open dialog with the diversity of families attending school will provide opportunity for school/family collaboration and less focus on the current practice of positioning families differently relative to what is the “normal” two parent North American family.

Reconstructing a school on the principles of collaboration and dialogue with families requires an exploration into the diversity of families in Canada. While such an exploration of *all* forms of diverse families remains outside the scope of this study, I will focus on a case example of how schools can establish dialogue with single mothers and move towards creating conditions that welcome their participation and involvement. This attention to single mothers is a timely endeavor. In Canada, the single-parent home has increased 8% since 2006, totaling 1,527,840 families (Statistics Canada, 2011). About 8 in 10 lone-parent families were female-led, accounting for 12.8% of all census families, while male-led lone-parent families represented 3.5% of all census families (Statistics Canada, 2011). Therefore, the single mother population is not a small and irrelevant population, but rather a growing population that requires voice and agency with respect to how schools determine parental involvement.

Through my roles as a principal in a Manitoban school and a graduate student, I intend to use this research to inform schools of the exclusionary nature of their systems and decisions towards facilitating parental involvement and the impact that their approaches can have on single mothers. The knowledge gained from this research will provide some direction towards strengthening collaboration between single mothers and

educators and, concomitantly, deconstructing some of the dominant power that schools have in their consideration of parental involvement.

Significance

This research explores the perspectives of three single mothers and their relationship with the educators in their child's school. Kay Standing (1999) explains that policies on parental involvement lead with educators in the school assuming that all parents share the same objectives and ideologies of school. The hope is that this study represents the objectives and ideologies from the single mother participants. I then analyze this information with the current research focusing on the relationship between single mothers and the educators at their child's school.

Hornby (2011) points out in his book *Parental Involvement in Childhood Education* that there are multiple models of parental involvement that school choose to use. One of these models is the “expert” model. Unfortunately, educators in too many schools are positioning themselves as the experts, which results in the parent’s views being minimized in this positioning process. Hornby (2011) explains further that the “partnership” model between parents and educators is the most appropriate model for educators working with parents. This model places the school as the experts in education and the parents as the experts in understanding their child. Using Hornby's (2011) focus on the partnership model in education, and through the stories of the participants in this study, I gained insight on how educators and single mothers can work together to create steps to a partnership approach to parental involvement.

Further, Standing (1999) explains that there is a negative discourse explaining that single mothers are to blame for children's truancy, delinquency, and poor

educational performance. This current research project provides a deeper awareness of what specifically single mothers are recommending for change in our school system as a means to increase the level of collaboration between educators and single mothers.

In sum, it is important that educators acquire knowledge and perspectives from the voices of single mothers and use their wisdom to enhance how a school can serve their families in the community. This assists with understanding what could be done when re-conceptualizing the system.

Layout

This research project is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I began with my narrative to provide my position as the researcher. I included the research puzzles, background of the study, and the significance for this research. Chapter 2 is comprised of the literature review and conceptual framework. Chapter 3 explains the methodology to conduct this research. This chapter briefly explains the participants, data collection process, and the approach to an analysis of the data. Chapter 4 includes the narratives for each participant. In Chapter 5, I provide my analysis of each narrative answering all three research puzzles. In addition, I make recommendations and finish with my concluding thoughts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I introduce poststructuralism, which is the theoretical framework that guides my research. I also illustrate the key concepts in the literature (Broussard *et al.*, 2012; Cairney *et al.*, 2003; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Kalil & Ryan 2010) that explain the life experience of single mothers. Using these key concepts as reference points, I explore the relationships between single mothers and the school system. I also analyze how single mothers are positioned in the literature within a schooling context. My goal is to use the literature to explain how single mothers are marginalized and the impact that this marginalization has on the relationship between single mothers and their children's schools.

Poststructuralism is a “theory of the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power” (Weedon, 1997, p. 12). Language is used in society to provide social meaning and can be used to evaluate social organizations. Weedon (1997) explains that language further provides our sense of ourselves, which is our subjectivity. Poststructural theory presents that our subjectivity is not innate or something that we are born with; it is produced socially. Subjectivity is never a fixed destination nor is it an unfixed destination with self, but is always in flux: “Poststructuralism theorizes subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the process of political change and to preserving the status quo” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). Power is explained as a “dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses who are agents” (Weedon, 1997, p. 110).

In this study, I employ a poststructuralist framework to deconstruct how the literature has positioned single mothers and why school reform is needed in the area of school relationships with single mothers. This framework provides insight focusing on single mothers and three key areas that the literature uses to depict a large population of single mothers. This insight expands into the current relationships and collaboration practices between single mothers and the educators in their child's school. I further deconstruct the areas that schools can reform in order to improve collaboration and practices with single mothers.

Currently in society, there are assumptions regarding the single mother discourse. The responsibility of raising children has been and still is the job of the mother (Anderson, 2000; Berman, Silver, & Wilson, 2007). Further, there are financial impacts to this discourse; society is placing the responsibility of raising children as the job of the mother, and this can economically remove mothers and specifically single mothers from the job market. As Jennifer Ajandi (2011) wrote in her article *Single Mothers by Choice*, current mothering discourse also creates assumptions that mothers are to devote all their time to motherhood and moreover, how many children mothers should have. Considering how society has negatively constructed single mothers, the questions that informed my literature review are as follows:

- 1) What does the literature describe as social and/or individual factors that effect the nature of parental involvement in schools for single mothers?
- 2) What does the literature suggest that might foster more collaborative practices between public schools and single mothers?

I approach the literature in three ways. First, I examine the reasons for parental involvement in education, and, more specifically, how diversity is understood in this body of literature. Second, I identify the assumptions underlying the single mother population in schools and then analyze this relationship between single mothers and their children's schools. Generally speaking, I consider (1) financial hardship, (2) difficulties with their own emotional health, and (3) social capital as determined by key areas in the literature. I show that these areas certainly do overlap and engage one another. I lay these approaches with personal narrative to explain the empirical and conceptual notions implied in the literature and provide some context. I explain how the literature has characterized single mothers in society and in schools. I then argue that certain interventions should be considered. Specifically, I argue for looking at school (or system) reform in a way to improve collaboration between schools and single mothers. In the following part, I discuss what the literature provides around parental involvement in schools first.

Parental Involvement in Schools

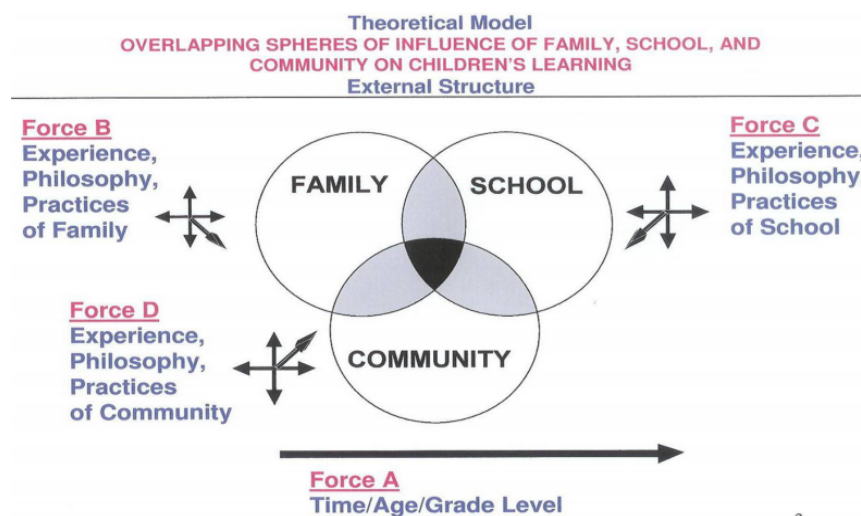
Recent literature focusing on the relationship and collaboration between parents and schools is primarily focused on two-parent homes (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* 2005; Walker *et al.* 2010). There is a scarcity of current research that discusses the relationship between schools and single mothers and the challenges to their collaboration (Griffith & Smith, 2005). Although slightly dated, Kay Standing (1999) studied lone mothers in the United Kingdom and their involvement in their children's school. Standing (1999) provides a perspective that pays attention to

the school composing assumptions regarding all parents having the same ideologies of schooling.

A majority of the current research initiatives in the areas of single parents' involvement in schools are driven around a deficit focus. In general, the literature discusses the social challenges of single mothers who are living in poverty, emotional and physical health deficits, and social exclusion (Cellini *et al.*, 2008; Crosier, *et al.*, 2007; Ribar & Hamrick, 2003).

In the majority of this literature, there are three parental involvement models that are widely used as reference by educators. This includes Epstein's (2011) model and Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2005) model, and Hornby's (2011) model focusing on parental involvement in education. Each model is described below.

Epstein's work (1995, 2011) is depicted as a Venn diagram of three overlapping spheres that intersect with each other in developing a strong educational system for improving schools and family collaboration.



(Epstein, 2011, p. 32)

Increasing overlap of these spheres represent more collaboration between schools, family, and community. The degree of each sphere overlapping is relative to three forces: (a) time, (b) experience in families, and (c) experience in schools. Time refers to the age and grade level of the child and the social conditions of the child at that time. Forces (b) and (c) represent the experiences of the school and the family. These experiences are relative to what is considered “involved” and what is considered “uninvolved” in parent-school relationships. The minimum and maximum levels of measurement for parent-school relationships are established by schools. The schools also determine the criteria for policy, contracts, rules, visits, and so forth (Epstein, 2011).

The model of overlapping spheres of influence and practices of parent involvement aims to: extend the studies of families by focusing efforts on the relationship between family and school environments and by intensifying attention to the total educational environment of children and the implications of the extension (Epstein, 2011). Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2005) have taken a similar approach in presenting why parents are involved in their child’s education, but they specifically look at issues through the lens of parental perceptions.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997, 2005) focused their work around three major contributors to parental involvement: parents’ motivational beliefs, parents’ perceptions of invitations to involvement, and parents’ life-context variables that are likely to influence involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) suggested that parents’ motivation to be involved in their child’s education is motivated by two belief systems: role construct and sense of efficacy. Role construct refers to the sense of

personal or shared responsibility for the child's education. The parents' personal sense of efficacy refers to their belief that they can actually help their child succeed in school.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2005) explain that even with a parent's strong level of role construct and self-efficacy, there still needs to be a strong level of perceived invitation from the school. This includes general invitations from the school, invitations from the teacher, and invitations from the child. They explain further that a parent's life context refers to socioeconomic status (SES), knowledge, skills, time, energy, and family culture. Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2005) report that the level of SES does not directly impact parents' motivation to be involved in their child's education, but rather, has a direct impact on the level of resources available to parents to become involved. For example, not having a vehicle or not having access to childcare will limit the level of potential involvement. Parents' knowledge and skills refer to the level of academic ability that parents have to support their child. Most parents are able to provide academic support when their child is in an early years school, but once their child moves on to middle and high school, some parents feel less knowledgeable and lack the skills to support their child academically. Time and energy refer to parents' work and other family responsibilities. For example, are parents' job hours/number of jobs flexible enough for them to be involved in their child's education and to meet the expectations of the school? Family responsibilities can refer to multiple childcare, eldercare, or related family tasks.

In addition, Hornby (2011) suggests six models for consideration: the protective, expert, transmission, curriculum enrichment, consumer, and partnership model. The protective model focuses on the teacher's role being to teach the child at school and the

parent's role to make sure the child arrives at school on time. The expert model refers to educators regarding themselves as experts on all aspects of the development and education of children and parents' perspectives are given little credit. The transmission model recognizes some of the parents' perspectives as a resource but focuses a majority of the power and main source of expertise on children from the perspectives of the educators. The curriculum enrichment model looks at extending the curriculum by incorporating parents' contributions. This model uses a unique approach by taking into consideration the parents' history, values, and views and infuses these characteristics into the curriculum. The consumer model pays attention to parents being the consumers of educational services. Educators act as consultants and the parents decide on various actions that should be taken in a school. This model puts the parents in control in the decision-making processes while the educator's responsibility is to provide the parents with the appropriate information and options to make sound decisions. The sixth and final model is the partnership model. In this model, the educators are seen as the experts on education and the parents are the experts in their child. This model can be successful because it involves sharing of the expertise and control: while parents are the experts at home, teachers are the experts at school.

In sum, it is clear that there are multiple perspectives of what "parental involvement" looks like and there is value in this diversity. Ultimately, there needs to be a common understanding that the involvement of parents in their child's education is important for the children and educators. More importantly, educators need to be aware that the level of parental involvement is not determined directly by the school, but rather, through a dynamic of constant communication and collaboration between the school and

parents. The objective, in my view, is to arrive at a collaborative consensus on what is an equitable approach for a parent(s) to be involved in their child's education and for schools to understand and accept that the level of parental involvement will be different for each family.

Moving forward in this literature review, power and marginalization among single mothers will be evident through the discussion of financial hardship, emotional health, and social capital. Unless noted otherwise, I use the term "hardship" to represent loss, pain, and/or suffering.

Factors Affecting Single Mothers and Parental Engagement in Schools

The three main factors affecting single mothers and parental engagement in schools that have emerged from my literature review are financial hardship, emotional health, and social capital. There is also a degree of personal connection to these as they were common within my own mother's mothering discourse that shaped her daily life. These three factors are intertwined with each other and are important in establishing a context for this narrative inquiry. They also offer the possibilities to explore what these single-parent families need from schools in order to support collaboration.

Financial hardship. There is extensive research that explains how lone-parent mothers are at the highest risk of living in poverty (Cellini *et al.*, 2008; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Poverty Trend Highlights, 2013). One of the main reasons single mothers enter into poverty is due to the simple fact that their family is operating on a single income. Dual incomes have become prevalent in society today. Having a second income does not necessarily mean that a family has an increase in disposable income, which is relative to a family's balance between needs, wants, and necessities. What a dual income can

provide is the opportunity for families to have different priority options. Even if a single mother is working, a high percentage of them have a low earning capacity (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). In a Canadian context, this means that “lone-parent families are 4 times as likely to be poor than two parent families with children” (Poverty Trends Highlights, 2013, p. 5). This trend has been on the incline since 2010. In 2011, 19.7% of lone-parent families lived in poverty, compared to 18.6% in 2010, which represents 35,000 more parents and children living in poverty in 2011 (Poverty Trends Highlights, 2013).

Extensive research from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), which is an ongoing study of 5,000 children in large cities in the United States, points out that there are three factors that shape the rates of poverty and financial hardship facing single mothers: earnings capacity, asset levels, and living arrangements (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). Kalil and Ryan (2010) further discuss contributing factors that are likely to limit single mothers’ earning capacity: poor health, substance abuse, experiences of domestic violence, lack of high school diploma, and lack of work experience. These additional factors do not include the identity markers such as race, ethnicity, and immigration status, which add another layer of the complexity and hardship that challenge single mothers (Cellini *et al.*, 2008). For example, poverty is high in female-headed household among racial ethnic minorities (Snyder *et al.*, 2006).

The onset of domestic violence or mental health problems complicates financial hardship. Heflin and Butler (2013) explain that it is not the onset of domestic violence or mental health problems, but more so the existence of these problems during the hardship that is problematic in the long term. If domestic violence is occurring in a home, safety and emotional support should not be something that mothers need to locate. They should

be able to know exactly who to turn to for guidance and collaboration, and find accessible answers. For example, my mother was concerned not only for her safety, but for the safety of my brother and me as well. My mother took us to a woman's shelter three times as a result of domestic violence and it was not until the third time that we finally left my father. The emotional toll of living in and out of shelters was heavy for our mother. As a result of being hidden, my brother and I could not go to school and our mother was not able to attend work. She risked losing her job over this absence. There were half a dozen mothers in similar situations also staying in the shelter with us. The atmosphere felt dark and quiet. The children watched television and some mothers talked to each other, but for the most part, it was a very depressing environment. The shelter felt cold, dark, and emotionally dead.

When looking at household composition, Heflin and Butler (2013) explained that having more children in the household encouraged recovery from financial hardship because support services were less inclined to monitor large numbers of children in a family compared to a smaller family. It is problematic when support agencies prioritize one type of family over another. Due to shelters being a very short-term solution, mothers are often forced to leave them and reside with family and friends for a longer period of time.

Over half of single mothers with children end up living with another adult as a result of a crisis (Snyder *et al.*, 2006). This is mostly due to the state of finances that mothers can be in when trying to leave their current relationship. Further, having to live with another adult can feel emotionally supportive and less lonely. This was particularly common during a couple of points in my childhood. For example, my mother would take

my brother and me to a friend's house in the middle of the night where we would hide for our safety for a couple days. My mother had her friend to support her through the difficult time and my brother and I felt lucky that we were able to hang out with our friends and not go to school. We clearly did not understand the magnitude of the problems.

In relationships where the mother is performing unpaid work at home full-time and does not have financial capital, the earning partner tends to position him or herself in a position of power. Strengthening the autonomy of single mothers is important as it helps to avoid situations of financial dependence on their partners.

Emotional health. Emotional health has linkages to financial hardship: "Poverty-related stress includes worries related to work, housing, food insecurity, discrimination, stigma, exposure to violence, victimization, and illness" (Broussard *et al.*, 2012, p. 191). Crosier *et al.* (2007) have yielded similar findings. Using cross-sectional data from a longitudinal survey of Australian households, single mothers are more likely to experience poor mental health than partnered mothers. The primary reasons for the likelihood of experiencing mental health problems were financial hardship and lack of social support. Hope *et al.* (1999) completed a longitudinal study that followed the 1958 birth cohort to the age of 33 and investigated alternative explanations for the excessive distress of single mothers. They also found that the primary reason for single mothers showing elevated signs of psychological distress was financial hardship. The experience of separation or divorce in itself was not seen as a primary indicator for depression. Employment, social support, and the number and age of children were supplementary distresses.

Turner (2007) carried out a study of 508 single mothers aged 18-39 living in rural Northern New England. These telephone interviews produced conclusions that unemployment and low income made significant contributions to the single mothers' current depressive symptoms. Being employed not only provided income and reduced financial strain, but also increased self-esteem and provided an additional source of identity and fulfillment.

In another example, Cairney *et al.* (2003) conducted a secondary survey to the 1994-1995 National Population Health Survey in Canada. They surveyed 2,921 single and married mothers derived from a general sample. They found that "rates of major depression are more than double among single as compared to married mothers" (Cairney *et al.*, 2003, p 445). Single mothers reported inflated levels of long-term stressors. They also felt that they had less social support and less time to spend with friends and family. Social involvement from single mothers was also time-sensitive and rarely took place because of the lack of time and finances to provide childcare and transportation (Cairney *et al.*, 2003). What they have explained is a level of depression and social exclusion very similar to the behaviors I can reflect upon from my mother. My mother was often up at 5:30 am and walked my brother and me approximately 1 km to our babysitter's house, pulling us on the toboggan. She then traveled for an hour on city transit to get to work at the hospital where she was a ward clerk. We finally arrived home at the end of the day around 6:30-7:00 pm. We had just enough time for supper and then to get ready for bed in order to begin a new day all over again. My mother had no time to socialize, no money for a babysitter, or enough gas in the vehicle to go visit her close

friend who lived a 30-minute car ride away. She focused her attention on my brother and me and led a secluded and introverted lifestyle.

As the research outlined above has suggested, financial hardship and lack of social support are the two leading factors contributing to the mental health problems of single mothers. Social support hinges not only on the financial means to provide childcare, transportation, and entertainment, but also to provide opportunity for parents to experience socializing with peers and family members, which can be emotionally healthy for parents. Socializing with other parents that are not necessarily in the same social network that a single mother may have can also increase their social capital within the community in which they live. The social capital of single mothers, at times, is repressed and/or devalued.

Social capital. Social capital is a valuable resource for anyone. It involves the attachment of groups of people through trust, information, connection, and networks (Brisson & Usher 2005). Putnam (2002) has divided social capital into two categories: bridging and bonding. Bonding social capital involves connections between individuals who have similar characteristics. For example, single mothers who are living in poverty and trying to complete their formal education may create bonding capital between these women. Bridging social capital is explained as connections made with individuals outside of one's community or identity (Brisson & Usher, 2005; Putnam, 2002). Single parents may tend to gravitate towards parents who are experiencing similar financial and emotional challenges. For a single parent, bridging can take place when there is opportunity for all parents (single or not) to connect socially in an inclusive environment.

Through a social capital lens, the literature implies that single mothers do not need to break away from their social group with similar ongoing struggles. There is value in keeping a level of positive social capital within their current community and in bridging outside of their community (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). With this said, keeping an open mind is necessary for individuals outside of a single mother's community in order to produce a meaningful effort towards collaboration. Single mothers have social capital to share with others, such as resiliency, negotiation, creativity, and time management.

Cohen (2004) discusses three key areas of support that social networks can provide: instrumental support (material items), informational support (knowledge or advice), and emotional support (empathy). A single mother's family (if available) can be the first contact for any of these three areas of support. Support might come from the bonds that they have created within their network of allies. These allies may provide access to necessary material supports. Building relationships outside of community networks may increase the opportunity for single mothers to exercise greater agency. For example, my mother did not have her own mother and father for support, as they had passed on by the time my mother became a single mother. She still maintained a distant relationship with her brother and sisters, but overall, she did not have a family network. She was fortunate to have a close friend, Janice, who was also a single mother. Janice thrived in her role as the sole provider for her family. She was a form of instrumental, informational, and emotional support that my mother could count on anytime. Janice and my mother had a bonding relationship because they were able to relate at the same level regarding the experiences of emotional health and financial hardship. This provided my

mother with a much needed increased level in self-efficacy and let her know that her emotions of doubt and helplessness were normal, but surmountable.

Social networks similar to what my mother had are more likely to develop when they are based on similar backgrounds as single mothers, income levels, race, gender, or culture (Cohen, 2004). Bridging between social groups and building social networks can be challenging. Freeman and Dodson (2014) explain that, “social networks that are not developed on the basis of family, culture, or church ties are often facilitated through outside organizations” (p. 592). A school may act as an outside organization for single mothers to help create bonds and bridges in social networks. Schools have the opportunity to develop a substantial amount of social capital within their communities. They are in a position to serve children from diverse families. They have the opportunity to facilitate social network building for families. If parents request support, schools are in a position of service. In my 14 years of serving as an educator, I have noted that very few families in the school community request any type of service due to their difficulties managing the social or emotional behaviors of their child, or having recently moved into our school catchment area and needed help finding a family doctor, or looking for families who they can talk to regarding housing questions or outside agencies to talk to regarding mental health services. If schools provide parents with the opportunity to have a voice at this point, there might be a shift from school providing “support” to school serving the needs of all parents and children. If schools continue to work on the periphery with families, then the current collaborative practices will remain the status quo. If schools can transition into meaningful service of needs, collaboration might become freer and progressive.

Framing Single Mothers and School Systems: An Analysis of the Literature

The depiction of the ‘family’ is normative: two-parent homes are the acceptable standard. Single parents deviate from the norm, and are therefore perceived as ‘outsiders’ and/or ‘failures’ that require ‘charitable’ school interventions (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Standing, 1999). This relationship pattern (schools provide support and parents accept it) is seen elsewhere in school life. For instance, when children come to school without having eaten breakfast, the school advocates and arranges breakfast for them. The breakfast program itself is good for children; it is when its provision is assumed to be the consequence of “bad parenting” that the tensions arise.

These relationship patterns are established through an educational discourse. As Griffith and Smith (2005) share, “educational discourse provides the working language coordinating a teacher’s classroom experience with that of other educators and administrators” (p. 34). Schools provide the foundation for how students are respected as humans and educators provide equitable resources for students from diverse families. It is inappropriate for schools to continue to view single-parent families as problematic and automatically assuming that problems in the classroom are directly related to the student being from a single-parent family (Griffith, 1984). For this matter, Griffith and Smith (2005) detailed an existing mothering discourse for schooling. This discourse was created because schools have an idealized image of the standard North American family. The mothering discourse for school suggests that this model of a standard North American family does not represent all families, specifically single mothers. In their book *Mothering for Schooling*, Griffith and Smith (2005) interviewed women who were either single or with a partner. Each interview established a different mothering discourse

for schooling. Each discourse was relative to who each mother was as a person and the value she held for public education. As a result, each mother had a different perspective of how she felt the school treated her and her family. The mothering discourses ranged from single mothers working the 'graveyard shift' and struggling to complete the complimentary educational work of home reading, to married mothers who work at home and have plenty of time to support their child with complimentary educational work. The school system is not consistently taking into account the practicalities and conditions of diverse families to meet the educational standards that are relative to the standard North American family. Both the educational discourse and mothering discourse that Griffith and Smith (2005) have discussed are influenced by the media, specifically how single mothers are positioned relative to mothers in two-parent homes.

Outside of the school, the media has not helped this image of single motherhood and has created a discourse of single motherhood that has been accepted by the general public as the norm, with little analysis on why single mothers are positioned in this light in society and in schools in the first place. A discourse of single motherhood is created in the media through the provision of parenting books, step-by-step child raising strategies, and the news media portraying single mothers as inept and with "at-risk" and unsuccessful children. Further negative messages have been projected through the media on various TV shows. For example, talk shows can be an avenue for low-income women and men to be heard nationally, but the images and messages conveyed are predominantly about dysfunctional relationships, infidelity, and unruly, promiscuous teenage girls (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001). Moreover, "single mothers are often

depicted as immoral and neglectful, responsible for their own poverty as well as the breakdown of the nuclear family” (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001, p. 235).

Educational discourse is complex due to the social influences in the nature of its development. Current parental involvement in school life includes volunteering on field trips, assisting with homework, and volunteering in classrooms. The problem with these school activities that define “good” parental involvement as those in which parents can make accommodations to be present, which, in effect, excludes the participation of single mothers. If a parent is unable to meet the school’s expectations, then she may be viewed as “uninvolved” or “uninterested” and, therefore, positioned as being unhelpful or uncaring. Parents have little control in how they can choose to be involved, but educators can choose the activities in which they invite parental involvement. As a result, if there is a disconnect between the school’s expectations and single mother’s lives, the relationship between schools and single mothers may face further strain.

Griffith and Smith (2005) describe the complimentary work that is expected of parents in supporting their child’s educational success. They write, “the level at which the required curriculum can be delivered varies with how much and what kind of educational work is delivered by parents” (p. 67). This point resonated with me as a school leader. Schools are expected to organize a kindergarten screening for children before entering kindergarten as a way to introduce new parents to the school system. This event also functions as a way for educators to observe and assess how well parents interact with and rear their child. It also reveals how parents prepare their child for school. If public schools accept all children, regardless of school readiness, then it is unclear why they initiate the inquiry into a child’s school-readiness in the first place.

Once in Kindergarten, teachers are expected to use an Early Development Instrument (EDI) to assess a Kindergarten child's readiness across several areas of childhood development (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2015). This creates a divide between families who can provide time and knowledge to prepare their child for school and families that are unable to provide it. It also systematizes a judgment process of who is doing a 'good job' and who is doing a 'bad job' at preparing their children for school, with little recognition of the privilege embedded in the Western, nuclear family norm used as a judgment standard.

There are different roles that mothers have in families. Looking specifically at the difference between a working mother and a mother working unpaid but full-time at home, Griffith and Smith (2005) explain, "there is a key difference between the employed and non-employed women we talked to, those who are full-time housewives are at home at crucial times of the day" (p. 70), which are those when the background work expected from school can be completed. If schools continue to have these expectations of families (e.g., to complete homework every night at a certain time), this will further establish a good/bad parent binary based on resource and time availability.

Reconsidering Parents and School Collaboration

Looking at the current collaboration practices between schools and parents, a common approach in fostering the relationship between schools and home involves separate contributions to supporting children. Social organizations that support the notion of separate contributions from family and school leave "little consideration to the ideas or histories of the other groups, or to their common or interlocking aims or goals, until there is a problem or trouble" (Epstein, 2011, p. 172). This model of separate

collaboration can decrease the level of understanding between schools and families and strain these relationships. In addition, only certain families are selected for parental involvement (those who can afford to miss work, for instance, and often from traditional family backgrounds), which gives students a normative and narrow impression of family and begins to establish a hierarchy around the notion of ‘family’.

An example of this disconnect involves a study that was completed by Epstein (2011) that surveyed 3,700 first, third, and fifth grade, teachers, principals, and parents from 600 schools in Maryland. Epstein (2011) wanted to know if there are different expectations for single-parent and two-parent homes when it comes to parental involvement in their children’s schooling. Parental involvement refers to work performed at home by parents. For instance, schools request that at home parents listen to their children read, practice needed skills, and discuss schoolwork, etc. Epstein (2011) found that regardless of their education, single parents reported more requests from teachers to be involved in learning activities at home than did married parents (Epstein, 2011). These findings are useful for educators to be aware of because, as explained earlier, single parents are limited in their available time in the evening and on weekends due to inconsistent working hours.

Hill and Taylor (2004) outline some of the mechanisms through which parental involvement affect children’s achievement. The first mechanism, which is social control, can be difficult for single parents to accomplish, especially those living in poverty: “Social control occurs when families and schools work together to build a consensus about appropriate behavior” (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 162). Unfortunately, collaboration between parents and the school principal is not required when the school is dealing with

student behavior. This is problematic if a child's home life is having an impact on him/her at school. This increases the principal's social control over children and decreases opportunity for dialogue (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Pointedly, schools are encouraged to continue to promote parental involvement in a manner that suits the school system. Life realities of single mothers who are living in poverty, socially excluded, and struggling to cope are often not taken into consideration in this venture. Learning their life narratives may help forge a reconsideration of the relationship between schools and single mothers.

In the following chapter, I describe narrative inquiry as the research methodology I used to understand single mothers' experiences in relation to their child's school. I want to learn from single mothers about the ways that schools can better respond to their life situations. I want to hear their voices.

Chapter 3: Narrative Inquiry as the Research Methodology

What is Narrative Inquiry?

"Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p.17). Narrative inquiry is a collaborative approach between the researcher and the participant to create understanding in lived experiences. Researchers come alongside each participant to first build a relationship and then slowly begin conversations about the lived experiences of the participant.

Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology, "addressing the conceptual underpinnings of the relational living alongside in narrative inquiry" (Clandinin, 2013, p 23). This means that it is important for researchers to pay attention to who the participants are during a narrative inquiry study. The participants' stories and experiences will have an impact on what the researchers will listen for and the questions they ask participants. As much as the study is about inquiring into the lives of the participants, the researcher is also under study in this relational methodology.

While the participant is sharing their powerful experiences, the researcher is turning inwards regularly to her/his own narrative to develop a deeper understanding of the participant's story. The researcher's story has substance due to the inquiry being a collaborative process. The researcher asks questions that are relative to the participant's experiences and the researcher's thinking processes. At the same time, the researcher is paying close attention to the social experiences of the participant during particular times and places of the inquiry. With this said, narrative inquirers always enter the relationship with the participant in the midst of their stories. Before entering into this relationship

with the participant and their story, the researcher spends concentrated time writing their own narrative beginnings so that they “begin to understand how the participants...can shape the inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 43). The researcher's narrative beginnings are then shared with the participants in full or in some capacity throughout the inquiry process. More than simply sharing stories, Clandinin and Connelly (2006) developed their own inquiry terms. These terms are referred to as the three commonplaces, which are: sociality and temporality, combined with the physical places experienced.

The three commonplaces provide a framework in narrative inquiry for the researcher to truly feel the emotions and the experiences of the participants. Temporality refers to inquiring into the “past, present, and future of the people, places, things, and events under study” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 39). In this study, the past refers to the participant's experiences as single mothers before their involvement in this study. Working within the present situation refers to what happened to the participants during this study. The future refers to the possibility that new stories will be lived by the participants and the researcher. As the participants share past events, the researcher is able to voyage with the participant back and forth between past and current events and experiences.

The sociality commonplace focuses on both the social conditions and the personal conditions. Again, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain that the social conditions refer to the setting and conditions in which people's experiences unfold. The personal conditions refer to the feelings, hopes and desires of the individual.

The third commonplace in the inquiry process that the researcher must look into is place. Place, refers to, “the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of

place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). It is important to note that the three commonplaces are not separated, but interconnected in the events and emotions shared during multiple conversations.

In narrative inquiry research, there are four key terms that Connelly and Clandinin (2006) developed to structure this process and they are living, telling, retelling and reliving of the stories of people's lives. For example, before this inquiry, I was living my storied life as a son, a father, and a school principal. The telling of my lived stories was the narrative beginnings I shared in Chapter 1. As Clandinin (2013) points out, “[we] understand that people *live* out stories and *tell* stories of their living” (p. 34). Sitting down and writing my narrative came very naturally. I believe this was the case because I am instinctively a reflective person. With this said, writing my narrative for this study, meant that it was important that I framed my story, just like I framed each participant's story, weaving in and out of the three commonplace framework.

The goal of narrative inquiry is for both the researcher and participants to begin living changed or new stories as a result of the inquiry. Clandinin (2013) writes that “as we retell or inquire into stories, we may begin to relive the retold stories” (p. 34). As I inquired into, or retold, my narrative beginnings, I became tested, trying to find deeper understanding in my experiences and my mother's experience. I found myself asking questions such as: What were the social attitudes towards single mothers at that time and how did this impact my mother? How did this positioning of single mothers impact my mother, my brother, and myself socially and in the particular schools that I went to? These questions led me to see the bigger social and cultural stories that had shaped my

mother's, my brother's and my own experiences. Our family arrangement deviated from the two-parent norm. My mother was seen as different, a victim, financially poor, and grouped together with every other single mother. As a result, stereotypes from the staff at the school were made and believed as true. For example, if I did not do my homework, it was brushed off by my teacher as being a result of an uncaring mother. If a teacher would have called my mother and shared their disappointment in my homework habits, my mother would have had a stern conversation with me, and my homework would be completed the next day. This illustration speaks to the social stereotypes my mother faced and the impact that this had on my brother and myself. As a result, expectations from my teachers were very low. I grew up attending public school believing that I was only capable of meeting these low expectations.

I feel that my work with each of the participants in this study will provide educators with a perspective within building relationships with families that will help provide a balance within the current practices. These stories will provide educators with examples of the emotional struggles and happiness that single mothers face trying to collaborate with educators. Further, I believe that my present narrative is forever changed after collaborating with each participant. I am living out a new story as a school principal in relation to the children and their families that I work alongside. It is paramount that I do not speak based on assumptions, stereotypes, or a homogenization of all families. This is the reliving of my stories.

Why Narrative Inquiry for this Project?

As narrative inquiry is much more than just sharing people's stories, it is important to address the questions: Who cares? So what? There are three ways to justify a narrative inquiry: personally, practically, and socially (Clandinin, 2013).

The personal justification refers to the inquirer "justifying the inquiry in the context of their own life experiences, tensions, and personal inquiry puzzles" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 36). This is reflective of my story as a boy, raised by a single mother and now as a school principal, in a position of authority. Growing up, I found it very frustrating feeling like an unknown student at school. After graduating from high school, I felt that my teachers and principals had no idea of my life experiences. This tension came from feeling like I was just another student filling a seat in the classroom. Now, as a school principal, I strive to engage with *all* students, hoping that they feel that their principal and teachers know who they are as human beings, not just students. I take time to know as many students as I can in a school year. I want to know how their home life is going and the extra curricular activities that they are participating in. Understanding the value in knowing the students in the school I lead is another reason why narrative inquiry was an excellent choice for this study.

As Clandinin (2013) explains, practical justification looks at the possible change or shifts in practice. The narratives shared for this project will hopefully shift the current imbalance in school-parent relationships. It is important for educators to understand that everyone has a story and to make space in schedules to listen to those stories.

Social justification can be thought of in two ways: theoretical justification and/or social action (Clandinin, 2013). In our current school system, the measurement for

student success at school is based on provincial assessment data. As educators, there is no expectation to put a percentage or a letter grade on the quality of relationships with families. As a result, these relationships are removed from the priority list of educators. For the system to shift, more emphasis must be placed on the social components of the school system. It would be helpful if our schools were staffed to allow for appropriate time to be taken to building partnerships with families and listening to their stories. At the school I lead, we have a resource teacher with a caseload of 10-15 children and she communicates with their family's daily. She uses the phone, Facebook messenger, text messaging, email, or the student's journal to communicate with families. Communication with families can be challenging for classroom teachers who have a caseload of 25-30 students. If school divisions, increased the number of teachers in a school, this would decrease each teachers caseload, freeing up time to build a partnership with families. Partnerships take time and social institution such as a school must provide flexibility within the day or evenings to build relationships with families. Building partnerships with families is important not only for the current children in schools but also for the next generation of children that enter our schools.

This research topic has always had a very personal connection with me. As a school principal, I strive to serve families. It was important to find a methodology that echoed the connectivity that I felt and was looking for, and to help me reflect on my own childhood experiences. I found narrative inquiry to be a research methodology that allowed me to be reflective with each participant and unearth those stories less heard.

Griffith and Smith (2005) wrote *Mothering for Schooling*. This book spoke to the individual differences that mothers experience in relationship with their children and

their educational institution. I found this book to be extremely helpful because the authors spoke about their own feelings and emotions as mothers and as researchers. This resonated with me as I was looking for a methodology where I would be apart of the learning process. In addition, Griffith and Smith provided me with an example of how to include my mother's experiences throughout this research process. This book helped me understand peoples' experiences and how to write them within research. As a result, narrative inquiry felt like a very good fit for the research puzzles that I had going into this project.

While this study is focused on single mothers, it does signal a crucial need for school administrators to reconsider all types of families in their schools and how their relationships with families are reflective of the human diversity that is so prevalent in Canadian contexts. Using narrative inquiry as the research methodology will hopefully provide educators with important stories that will possibly help serve the diversity of families that attend public schools.

The Narrative Inquiry Process with Three Participants

Recruitment of Participants

After my research proposal received ethics approval by the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, I began recruiting participants for this study. Criteria for participation included: women who are single, living on their own, and raising one or more children in their family, with a minimum of one child registered in public school. As a male researcher in a position of authority and privilege, finding participants was not easy. I used a snowball sampling approach to recruit participants. Outside of the everyday work place, there are common places that

some single mothers do visit regularly, such as, not for profit organizations such as family resource centers or community centers. I contacted these agencies and provided them with a copy of my research poster to hand out to potential participants. In the end, I recruited participants through my networks.

One day in September 2016, I was talking with Sarah about my project. I asked her if she knew of single mothers that would be interested in participating in this project. Sarah said yes, she knew of a single mother that might participate and she provided me with Robyn's contact information. Further, she said that she would like to participate in this study. Sarah worked with Robyn and said that Robyn has had some challenging experiences with her child's school and Robyn would be a great resource for this project. I sent Robyn a text message to arrange for a good time to call her to arrange our first meeting. The third and final participant was recruited by email. I had emailed a not-profit organization in October 2016 explaining that I looking for participants. Later that month, I received an email from the director of the not for profit organization providing me with the contact information to Tara, who is the third participant in this study. I called Tara that day to arrange our first meeting. Participants read and signed the official letter to participate in the study. The participant letter included a description of the research study and my contact information.

In advance of my initial conversations with the first two participants, I asked them each to write down a schedule that represents a day in their life. I made this request so they would each have something prepared to share for our first conversation. It was challenging to find a third participant for this study. I did not ask the third participant to write out a schedule in advance of our first conversation. I chose to do this because I did

not want to assign her work and possibly deter her from participating in this study. As a result, I chose to start our initial conversation talking about an average day in her life.

As each conversation progressed, I continued to share more of my narrative as needed. As I would share some of my story, conversations between the participant and myself progressed to a deeper level. In addition to sharing segments of my narrative during our first sit-down conversation, participants began talking about either the schedule they created or their children. This approach naturally led each participant to talk about their children and their experiences at school.

The images below have been sketched to provide an image for readers as they engage with this project. The images are not actual pictures of the participants.

Robyn



Occupation: Working in the field of K-12 education.

Children: One child, Carter, 9 years old.

Tara



Occupation: Unemployed

Children: Two children, ages 9 and 14.

Sarah



Occupation: Working in the field of K-12 Education.

Children: Three Children ages 9, 12, and 14.

Creating Field Texts (Data Collection)

In the research process of narrative inquiry, there are two possible starting points: listening to individuals tell their stories, and living alongside participants as they live and tell their stories (Clandinin, 2013). For this project, I chose to start with listening to

participants telling their story. This became a comfortable starting point for the participants and helped establish a trusting relationship with each participant.

The process for building trust in any relationship can take time, but for hard-to-reach populations, this process can be complex. It is important to note that my intentions were to not only build trust initially with each participant but to maintain trust with each participant throughout the narrative inquiry process. As Sara Makris (2012) explained in her doctoral dissertation, *Narrative Inquiry on the Lives and Experiences of “Outsider Teachers”*, building trust first began with how she positioned herself as the researcher. Makris (2012) explained that it was helpful to share with each participant that as the researcher she was not conducting research “on” each participant but rather “with” each participant. To this point, I explained to my participants that I was focused on learning, and that I wanted each of them to feel as comfortable as possible throughout the process.

I began building trusting relationship with each participant when I shared segments of my narrative, which I wrote in Chapter 1, before each initial sit-down conversation. Sharing segments of my narrative demonstrated that I was willing to be vulnerable throughout this research process. If I wanted each participant to open up and share their stories with me, it was critical that I take the first steps in sharing.

There are numerous ways to create field texts (Clandinin, 2013). I chose to gather three types of field texts: Research conversation transcripts, research journal, and participant journal. This section describes the process initiating and collection field texts for this study.

Each conversation was arranged according to each participant’s schedule and the location was mutually agreed upon between the participant and me. Each conversation

ranged from 45 minutes to 65 minutes in length. At the end of each sit-down conversation I decided we would talk about anything not related to our discussion. I chose to end our meetings this way because the conversations were emotionally heavy. I felt it was helpful research practice to not quickly dismiss the heavy emotions that they were feeling at the end of our conversation.

The conversations took place in the following order. I began with Robyn's conversation #1, Sarah conversation #1, Robyn conversation #2, Tara conversation #1, Sarah conversation #2, and Tara conversation #2.

Working with Robyn was a 4-month process. There was a 4-week break between conversation #1 and #2. This break was reflective of Robyn's busy work schedule. Furthermore, she wanted to find time when Carter was visiting his father to allow Robyn and I private time to meet. The gap between conversation #2 and #3 was approximately 11 weeks. During this time I wrote Robyn's interim research text in preparation for conversation #3.

The conversation process for Sarah was also 4-months in length. There was a three-week break between conversation #1 and #2. This was a result of Sarah's busy work schedule. In addition to Sarah's busy work schedule, she also spent time driving her children to the extra curricular activities that her children were signed up for. Sarah also wanted to find time to meet when her children were visiting their father, to provide us a private time to meet for our conversations. Similar to Robyn, there was an approximately 11-week break between conversation #2 and #3. At this time, I also wrote Sarah's interim research text in preparation for our third conversation.

The conversation process with Tara was also a 4-month process. There was a 4-week break between conversation #1 and #2. This break was a result of my work schedule and transcribing the conversations for Sarah and Robyn. I was able to meet with Tara during the day while her children were at school. We met at the same local coffee shop for each conversation. The length of time between conversation #2 and #3 was 8 weeks. During this time, I wrote Tara's interim research text in preparation for our third conversation.

I transcribed each conversation verbatim, making very few grammatical changes to capture the authenticity of each conversation. As I transcribed, I stopped playback on my iPhone to section off chunks of each conversation and assigned a theme to maintain organization and quick recall. In addition, I transcribed each conversation with my journal at my side. I wrote down any areas in the conversations that I felt I needed to flesh out or unpack with each participant. It was important to write these thoughts down immediately because the next sit-down conversation with each participant was normally weeks away from the time I was transcribing our conversations.

In addition to research conversations, I used a research journal. After each conversation I had with participants, I wished the participant well and expressed my gratitude for their participation. I then stayed later and wrote my immediate thoughts and wonders in my journal. Using the three commonplaces focused these thoughts. I wrote down the names or roles of the individuals they referenced. Afterwards, I wrote down the locations that were shared and the importance and reflected on the social and personal impact that each participant's story was having on them.

After the first formal sit-down conversation that I had with each participant, I provided each participant with a small journal to record any questions or thoughts that they might have after we would sit down and have our conversations. I explained that the journal was optional and private. They did not have to share anything that they did not feel comfortable sharing. Sarah was the only participant who wrote down some notes on a scrap piece of paper for our second conversation. The comments that she provided referenced her work experience with single mothers in the field of education. The first comment focused on the financial impact single parent families face and the importance for educators to be aware. Sarah's second comment compared perspectives from educators on a student who experiences a parental divorce to a student who experienced a parent who had died. Both comments were very valuable and I am glad that I provided participants journals even if the usage was limited. I also think providing each participant with a journal showed them that I am very interested in every wonder or question that they might have pertaining to this project.

Creating Interim Research Text (Data Analysis)

I left significant time between conversation #2 and #3 with each participant. This was to provide myself with enough time to write a comprehensive interim research text. I wrote the interim research text for each participant to set up the third and final conversation. "Interim research texts are a way to engage in further re-telling and re-livings of research relationships" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 49). This process provided me with the opportunity to share with participants their lived experiences. While writing the interim research text, it was important for me to create understanding of their lived experiences. Furthermore it was significant for me to understand the relationship that

each participant's story had with my story. This was a tricky process, as I had to negotiate meaning while staying in the three commonplaces. In addition, writing the interim text encouraged me to reflect on our experiences as a researcher and participant to make sure that I was constantly present within this work. It was important that I also maintain organization within each conversation that I had with each participant. In narrative inquiry, it is important to allow the participants to take the lead in sharing their stories. With this said, there was no chronological order during their conversation. Each participant shares their thoughts as they come to mind and it was my role as the researcher to establish organization in each narrative.

Below, there is an image of the annal that I created for Tara after our first conversation. Clandinin (2013) describes an annal as a way to create a framework to build a participants oral history. The annal that I created was very helpful for our second conversation. It also

Tara → Mom Dawson → Grade 5 Anthony → Grade 10 Riches = Richmond Elmchute = East Side Southwest = Northwood Labrangum = Lowburg Arberage School = Arlington St. Anne School = St. Peters Steinbach = Stillworth Grade 10 was Baritone Councilor					
K	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Current Grade 5
Dawson picked the bus "kicked the boy and was the only one in trouble." Grade 4: - German kids talking about it - Principal did nothing - Principal told bus driver Dawson started this all (then not anymore) - End of yr Dawson was stealing. Abs to Mt. Grade 5: - Broken foot to start school - Teacher didn't want me dropping him off at school. - Tara felt's school is different now than when she went to school. - Problems sharing scribbles. - No attitude during the summer... - Starts school with all attitude. - poor communication b/w stuff. Goal relationship with bus driver "He was strict but not that strict."					

provided our conversations with a starting point. Naturally our conversation evolved after reviewing the annal checking for accuracy within the three

commonplaces.

I wrote an interim research text after I had completed my second conversation with each participant. Prior to writing, I listened to each participant's voice recorded

conversation, while following along with the transcript. I used the three commonplaces to frame the structure and organization of my writing. I first marked the transcript referencing the chronological order of their story (temporality). For example, if the participant referenced a story about their child in kindergarten in our first and second conversation, I marked the transcripts to join the two references. Next, I looked for the people (sociality) that were consistently mentioned in their transcripts. For example, the principal, teacher, and resource teachers were referenced regularly. The third area that I referenced in their transcripts was the places that were mentioned. Due to the topic of this project, the school was a common reference point. Additional places of interest in each narrative were the home, principal's office (front office), and meeting rooms. After writing each participants interim research text, it was time to arrange the third conversation with each participant.

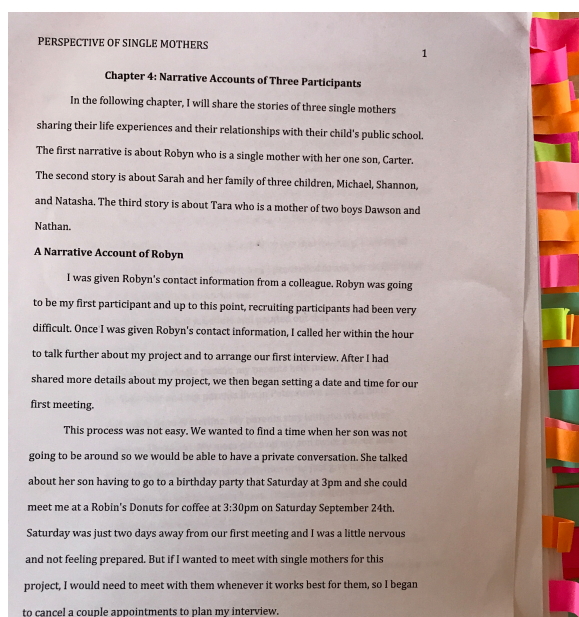
Creating Final Research Text (Data Analysis)

To prepare for the third and final conversation with each participant, I printed two copies of their interim research text. One copy was for the participant and one copy was for myself. Prior to our third conversation, using my copy, I pre marked a couple sections within the interim text where I wanted some more clarification. These sections were selected based on temporality, sociality and place. For example, Robyn mentioned that her parents came to look after Carter twice a week to provide Robyn with a little break for herself. I was not sure where (the place) her parents lived. This was an important section to address because her parents would drive a significant time (1.5 hours) to Robyn's house twice a week to look after Carter. I briefly marked the answers down in the margins of the interim research text so I was able to reference these points

while later I listened to our conversations that were also recorded. We each had a copy of the interim research text and a pencil in hand. Clandinin (2013) explains, "narrative inquirers and participants co- compose the interim and final text" (p. 205). This process reflects the relationship that I had with participants, making sure I researched with them and not on them. I clarified with each participant that I was going to read out loud the interim research text, paragraph by paragraph. I asked participants after each paragraph if my writing was accurate in portraying what they said to me. I also explained that if at any time they wanted me to stop reading, to please interrupt me and I would stop reading. Each read through was unique, and the exercise became emotional for the participants. These emotions were at times very visible, with tears, emotional stutters within speech, or even a pause in their voice to collect their thoughts. After the third conversation, I added additional information to create the final research text.

When the time came to sit down and read each participants narrative accounts multiple times, it became very clear to me that there was a common thread that wove in and out of each story. This thread was a lack of trust in the relationships that Robyn and Tara had with the principal and teachers in their schools. On the contrary, in Sarah's narrative, she spoke about the abundance of trust that she had mutually built with the principal at her school. Once I had established this common thread, I began to read through the literature (Kochanek 2005; Louis 2007; Turnbull et al., 2011) around building trusting relationships, looking for recommended components to build a trusting relationship

At this point, I went back to each narrative account and began labeling the sections of each narrative that talked about trust, communication, attitudes, and value. The image below displays the extent of my labeling with different colors. The pink labels focused on the attitudes of staff, orange labels focused on communication from staff, green labels focused on trust between staff and participant, and blue labels focused on



the school staff valuing their relationships with each participant.

As these four threads wove in and out of each participant's narrative, it became apparent that a term to group these threads together for description purposes only was the term tapestries. Webster defines tapestries as, "something made up of different things, people,

and colors" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2017, n.p.). I found this concept useful for this research because the complexities of each story provided some natural similarities that must be explained in manner that respects the individuality of these women's stories. Much like a tapestry, each story is unique, intricate, and multi-layered. In addition, I used these threads to create a canvas that deconstructs the power, authority, and judgment norms among teaching staff that positioned themselves as the "experts".

As the researcher, my own narrative is woven in and out of each story through my interpretation of the data. As Clandinin (2013) shares, "we as inquirers need to pay close attention to who we are in the inquiry and to understand that we ourselves, are part

of the storied landscapes we are studying” (p. 30). This means that I feel each participant's story has a hand woven relationship with my own narrative as a son of a single mother and now as a school principal.

In the following chapter I present the three narrative accounts of the participants in this study. These narrative accounts were co-composed between each participant and myself. Each participant provided a close and intimate look into their own lived experiences as single mothers, expressing their private and emotional experiences. These narratives also speak to the relationship, or lack there of, with the staff at their children's school.

Chapter 4: Lives of Single Mothers: Three Narrative Accounts

The first narrative is about Robyn who is a single mother with one son, Carter. The second story is about Sarah and her family of three children, Michael, Shannon, and Natasha. The third story is about Tara who is a mother of two boys Dawson and Nathan. For the purpose of anonymity, the names of the women and their children are pseudonyms. All identifying information such as community names or schools have been masked. The images portrayed are meant to apply a human face to the narrative, and do not represent the actual faces of the study participants.

A Narrative Account of Robyn: A Persistent Mother

I was given Robyn's contact information from a colleague on September, 2016. Robyn was going to be my first participant. Up to this point, recruiting participants had been very difficult. It took two months to find my first participant. I found that posting my posters and emailing organizations that are connected with single mothers provided no leads for recruitment.



Robyn.
Illustration by: Kent Martens, 2017

Once I was given Robyn's contact information, I called her within the hour to talk further about my project and to arrange our first sit down conversation. After I had shared more details about my project, we began setting a date and time for our first meeting. My first lesson was that the relationships between participants and researchers are built on dialogue, relationships, and trust, and not on posters and emails.

This process of setting up a time to meet was not easy. We wanted to find a time when her son was not going to be around so we would be able to have a private

conversation. She talked about her son having to go to a birthday party that Saturday at 3pm, so she could meet me at a Robin's Donuts for coffee at 3:30pm on Saturday September 24th. Saturday was just two days away from our first meeting. I was a little nervous and did not feel prepared. However, the second lesson I learned was that if I wanted to meet with single mothers for this project, I would need to meet with them whenever it worked best for them. I began to cancel a couple of appointments to plan my conversation with Robyn.

I arrived at Robin's Donuts twenty minutes ahead of our meeting. I had also brought a notebook for Robyn to take home at the end of our meeting for her to write any thoughts that she might have before our second meeting. I brought my own journal, which had some broad stroke questions. During our previous phone conversation, I asked Robyn if she would be able to write down a brief outline of a typical day in her life, with times of the day and activities recorded, and to bring this to our first meeting. Robyn brought the one page schedule to our first meeting. I informed Robyn I was turning on my voice recorder and I proceeded to ask her to share her schedule that she had written down for me.

Robyn showed me her schedule, and pointed out that this schedule is not always consistent:

Because I'm a single parent, my parents help me out a lot. I live in Waterline and my parents live in Peterstown about an hour and a half from Waterline. My parents stay with me when they come and help out. My mom picks up my son twice a week and takes him to extra curricular activities, or to just give me time to go to the gym

and give me a break. (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 1)

Robyn lives in the city Waterline with her now 9-year-old son Carter. She works 45-60 minutes out of town as an educator. She began speaking about her son and some of his needs:

Carter has ADHD, sensory processing issues, general anxiety disorder and we are in the process of having these assessments completed. And, yes it's a lot. Two days a week we are starting to have Respite. This provides a little mental break for myself.
(Research conversations transcript, September 24, 2016, p.1)

Respite is a provincial program that provides parents with trained personnel to come and take care of their child with special needs during the week. The purpose of this program is to provide parents with a temporary break and to offer children the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Robyn shared that the schedule that she shared with me is manageable, but she talked about how routine was very important for herself and her son. Routines help Carter know what they were up to after school in advance, which helps settle his anxiety. Robyn shared further that if she falls behind in sleep, it is challenging to keep up her routines. On occasion, she has forgotten to make lunch for Carter, but the school has been gracious about providing a small bag lunch. It is a rare occurrence, but this example underscores the importance of maintaining a routine, which can be doubly challenging for a single parent to manage.

I asked Robyn to take me back to the schedule that she had during their family's life as Carter entered Kindergarten. This had been a challenging time for their family. Robyn's ex-partner (Carter's father) was living with them for a short time, and sadly, their relationship became violent. At one point 911 was called because Robyn's ex-partner was verbally and emotionally violent towards her, and she was scared for her life. When he punched the walls of their home a couple times, that was the end of their relationship.

Robyn and Carter then moved to the city of Waterline and Carter began Kindergarten at Old Tom School, a school for Kindergarten- Grade 5 students. Soon after Carter began Kindergarten, Robyn met with his teacher and asked that Carter begin seeing the Guidance Counsellor. Robyn made this request because she noticed anxiety from Carter at home. Further, she was concerned that the recent separation from her ex-partner was having an impact on his emotional well-being. The school accommodated this request and Carter began to see the Guidance Counsellor on a regular basis.

Robyn had wonderful things to say about the Guidance Counsellor: "You know, when I would walk into his office, he was very welcoming. He had pictures on the wall of his kids" (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 6).

She shared further:

I felt more comfortable with him because there was a relationship there; you know he talked like a counsellor did. You know, he would say, "I understand", he was very empathetic. It worked, and it just felt like he was taking my suggestions into consideration. For example, I said I would really feel better if you guys would meet on a regular basis

because Carter doesn't know how to say to the counsellor, "I'm having a hard day", so meeting once a week was something consistent. (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 6)

Robyn felt that the Guidance Counsellor/Vice Principal, Mr. McKay, had Carter's genuine interests in mind. One day, he mentioned to Robyn that there was a hockey program during the school day in which the students at Old Tom School might have an opportunity to participate. Mr. McKay thought that Carter would be an excellent candidate for the program, which might help build his self-confidence and possibly decrease some anxieties. Robyn agreed, and Mr. McKay added Carter to the list of names being considered for the hockey program.

Unfortunately, at the end of Carter's grade 2 year, Mr. McKay was appointed the Principal position at a neighbouring school. This was just after Robyn was beginning to see that Carter was having further challenges at school. Based on Robyn's education and professional experiences as an educator, she recognized that Carter was having social emotional and self-regulation problems at school.

At the beginning of Carter's Grade 3 year, Robyn called the school principal to find out when the hockey program was going to be starting. The principal said, "Sorry, the program is not for Carter. The program is for students who are less privileged."

Robyn shared with me that she told the principal, "'I didn't recall giving you my finances'. She (principal) knew what I did for a living so maybe she guessed" (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 3). Robyn was not happy about this decision as she was counting on this program benefitting Carter. I asked her to share further how she felt:

I felt that they thought that because I was a professional, that everything was okay for Carter? But I might have the same struggles that lower income single parents might have and there is a lot in that area. I just felt like he (Carter) was being neglected.

(Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 3).

Once she found out that Carter was not going to be in the hockey program, she began to ask Carter's teacher if she could arrange a meeting to have Carter work with student services supports. After the following response from the teacher, Robyn requested a meeting with the principal to address her concern with Carter's emotional and self-regulation challenges. Robyn recalled the teacher saying, "I have, like, 4 kids on behaviour programs and Carter doesn't stand out and I don't have time to take notes on him'. I felt like if I had a partner, we could kind of tag team them a little bit" (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 3). Robyn further described:

Sometimes, you don't mesh well with somebody and I feel at a disadvantage. I feel like I can handle things and that I speak my mind when I need to. But it is very intimidating when the teachers kind of just, "well that's how it just is", I feel they are dismissive and they don't have time. That surprised me. I don't know. They didn't have time for this one child. (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 3)

As Carter's Grade 3 year continued, Robyn's concerns about Carter's well-being and education grew worse, so she arranged to have a meeting with the teacher, principal,

and resource team. Robyn describes her frustration during the meeting after she made a suggestion:

Well at one of the meetings, one recommendation was to have a schedule on the desk and the teacher said, “no he doesn’t need that, we have a schedule on the classroom wall that we can check off”. She took his fidgets (toys that limit distractive behaviour) away because he was fidgeting with them. Stuff like that. I don’t know what it was. (Research conversations transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 9)

This meeting did not end as Robyn expected; she had hoped that the school would consider some of her suggestions. Considering her role as an educator who supports children whose needs are similar to Carter’s needs, Robyn was shocked that the school did not implement any of her suggestions.

Robyn felt quickly dismissed during the initial meeting. She felt unable to compete (that is, advocate for her son, contribute sufficiently, or create change) as a single participant. Consequently, she arranged a second meeting that included a caseworker from the Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre (MATC).

Carter was receiving play therapy outside of the school system from MATC for his anxiety. Robyn went into the following meeting feeling comfortable and confident that she now had someone else there with her. The meeting started much more positively, but once the MATC worker shared why she was there, the meeting changed direction once again. The school began dictating how the meeting was going to take place and what the plans for Carter would be at school moving forward:

The counsellor from MATC wanted to be the case manager for us. So she came to a meeting (at the school) and she said her role was to provide me with parenting skills. I didn't like that and I felt that at that time. It made me feel incapable. Maybe there are parents that need that type of thing. I felt at that point they (school) took me less seriously. (Research conversations transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 10)

I could hear how hurtful the meeting felt for Robyn. The caseworker from MATC was not there because Robyn lacked parenting skills. Rather, she was there to support Robyn. In any case, the meeting appeared unproductive. Although the school team agreed to complete an occupational therapy assessment for Carter, they believed that he did not need a psychological assessment. Robyn was not sure what to do next. She felt helpless, especially because the guidance counsellor who had listened to her was no longer working at the school or attending these meetings. The staff did not want to hear what Robyn, a parent and professional colleague, had to say about programming for her child.

All these meetings took a toll on Robyn professionally, emotionally and physically:

This was affecting me. I was depressed. I was spending all day thinking about it. I was sleeping more (depressed) and I was eating more. I really feel like it put me into a depression. He (Carter) would also call me from school saying he was sick and needed to go home. I had to take time off work or my mom picked him up.

At this (New School) school they allow him to call me at anytime.

Not at the old school. So he just ended up wanting to go home. The school decided to say, “no you’re not calling your mom” or “just come pick him up”. One less student for them to look after.

(Research conversations transcript, October 24, 2016, p. 9)

To avoid losing her job, Robyn would have to rely on her mother to pick up Carter from school when said he was sick and needed to go home. I asked Robyn to elaborate on how her relationship with the school was impacting Carter:

It was about a 10-minute drive home from Old Tom School and we would have a nice talk in the car, but sometimes he was so grumpy. We would get home and he would just throw his jacket off and throw his socks off and he would just go under the blanket with his iPad, he couldn't even be around anyone for a couple hours. That's a huge chunk of the night. (Research conversations transcript, October 24, 2016, p. 3)

During our third conversation, Robyn mentioned that it felt like Old Tom School did not take into consideration the impact of their decisions on Carter at home in the evening. She said that many times this was the case for Carter. He would work so hard trying to hold his emotions together at school, that when he came home, he would struggle emotionally. Carter had worked so hard during the day to behave that when he got home he would get upset easily and shut down emotionally.

During the spring time of Carter's Grade 3 school year, the relationship between Robyn and the school was not working. Constructive communication had come to a stop,

and Robyn was called only to pick up Carter due to behavioural concerns. Robyn shared a story about an incident at school when Carter was punched in the face. She shared that Carter likes the colour pink, and he is not shy to wear pink shirts and shoes. At one point, Carter had actually dyed his hair pink. Unfortunately, when Carter got home one evening he told Robyn that other kids were teasing him for wearing pink. She mentioned that,

I talked to him about focusing on the positive comments. I told him, 'I'm sure lots of people liked it' and I asked what Carter's teacher had said to him. Carter responded, 'She said, 'well boys don't really wear bright colours so if you don't want to be teased then don't wear it'. (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 7)

It was clear at this point in the conversation that Robyn was not happy again with how his teacher had dismissed her son's feelings. Robyn said that she needed to do a "gut check" to see if she was over reacting. She went to her Facebook account and began talking with her friends about what had happened. Robyn, who is also a member of the Manitoba Teachers Society, knew to avoid using school or employee names during any online posts. She simply shared her side of the story; "just saying what happened and does this seem weird to you, you know just to my friends and everyone was very supportive" (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 7).

Later that week, Carter was at school wearing pink for the school's participation in National Anti-Bullying Day, a day when all students are encouraged to wear pink in solidarity. Ironically, this was the same day Carter was punched. Robyn noted:

The Vice Principal calls me. During the conversation, I say to the Vice Principal, since I'm talking to you anyways, I mention my

Facebook post and I made sure I said to her (Vice Principal) I didn't put any identifying information on my post. The next day I get a call from the Principal. Anyways the teacher reported me to MTS. So I call MTS and they said you weren't in breach of anything and the MTS officer wrote the apology and then emailed it to me and I copied and pasted it in my email to the teacher.

(Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 7)

Robyn felt that Carter's safety and well-being should have been the focus of the conversation, but, from the school's perspective, the bigger problem was Robyn's Facebook post. This was the end for Robyn. She felt her son was not safe at the school, and she no longer had a relationship with the staff. As the end of the Robyn's relationship with Old Tom School, it was becoming clear that the place (Old Tom School) was no longer the same without him working there. Robyn lost the one person she was able to trust.

Robyn said, "So at that point then it was time for us to move schools. The Principal called back regarding her Facebook post and said, 'feel free to come and see us with anything,' but I didn't. I felt judged." As Robyn explained this, she looked like she was explaining something that she did wrong, when she had a very valid reason to write on Facebook.

Robyn explained why she might have possibly gone to Facebook:

That's what you miss about not having a partner; I don't want to be calling my friends all the time (unpacking problems with the school). What should I do... what should I say...

what do you think. I go to Facebook. If I had a partner, see in the evenings, that is when we would talk about this stuff.

That's another struggle. (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 7)

I wanted to know if the unraveling of her relationship with the staff at Old Tom School was related to the Guidance Counsellor leaving the school. I asked, "...what do you think you would have done if the Guidance Counsellor was still at the school, after the punching incident? Would you have gone to him first rather than going to Facebook?"

Robyn explained, "I think I would have emailed him instead of going on Facebook. That's how comfortable I felt. He would have advocated for me" (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 7).

Robyn mentioned a recommendation that evolved from our conversation:

I think for single parents, it would be neat if there were a person for single parents to contact. Like an advocacy group. You know, at the beginning of the year, connect with them (single parents). You know, someone you can email or talk to. Don't need to do fundraising. "I'm here for you" to give advice on how to talk to the school. (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 8)

Robyn was not only speaking from her perspective in regards to what would help her; she also wanted other single parents to avoid having problems in their relationship with staff members of their child's school.

I asked Robyn now that she has left Old Tom School, did she feel that she was not being taken seriously because she was a single mother? She responded:

I felt that they weren't taking me seriously. I don't think I felt intimidated. But I felt like the single parent thing was working against me, but when I told them about my profession, I felt that then they thought, "well she can just take care of him. She has the means to do that", like I can't win. (Research conversations transcript, October 12, 2016, p. 5)

I asked further, "How did you feel when sitting in those meetings? If you had to explain those feelings to someone, what would you say"?

She replied, "Yes, I did have those feelings that if there was someone else that would back me up and that if there was a team approach, I did kind of feel like it was me against them. I was prepared to deal with that because it's my son and I will do that" (Research conversations transcript, October 12, 2016, p. 5).

Once Robyn came to the realization that Old Tom School was not going to be a good fit, she was fortunate to move Carter to another school in the same catchment area, and she found private daycare in walking distance to the school. Robyn's story made a dramatic change as she began talking about The New School. She describes this school as amazing and welcoming. When Robyn arrived to fill out the registration form, she said, "The principal gave me a tour of the school which was great" (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 6). About a month later:

I filled out the registration and that night they were having a BBQ and so we went and the Principal didn't know we were going but when we got there, she personally came up to us and said hi to Carter and I was so impressed by that and she made a personal connection with him. (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 8).

Robyn shared that this was a smaller school, only 1 class per grade, Kindergarten to Grade 6. Robyn walked Carter to his first day of school at The New School. Carter shared at the end of his first day that he had a lot of fun. Robyn walked Carter to school for the second day and sent a bunch of fidget toys and chewy fidgets to help with his focus, and she followed up with an email to the teacher and resource teacher explaining why she sent them. The email was replied with a thank you and an acknowledgement that the teacher would provide these things to Carter when his focus in class was showing signs of declining. The teacher's email invited Robyn to email her anytime. For Robyn, this was a relief to finally have the beginnings of a partnership between her and the school.

At the point of this conversation, Carter was only 5 weeks into his new school, and Robyn was very happy with the start. I asked her how Carter was feeling about school Robyn answered:

One day he came home and was upset because he got moved in the classroom because he was talking. One day he said, "I'm sitting beside my new best friend John, he tells me shhhh". (Robyn

giggles). That to me, showed a good teacher because she is using the resource she has, she is using other students to regulate Carter's behaviour (teacher can't do everything) and then one day he came home and said, "mom, my teacher said I had a good day today". So I emailed the teacher thanking her, you know, giving her positive reinforcement. Every time she does something nice like that I email her to thank her and keep the lines of communication open. (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 8)

I asked Robyn if there was that one person in The New School that she could trust and count on just like the Counsellor at Old Tom School.

She paused for a couple seconds and said, "Well the principal, I mean everyone is just fantastic, I feel like they are a good team" (Research conversations transcript, September 27, 2016, p. 8). I asked her if she feels they will be honest and respectful to her. She responded affirmatively:

Yes, I was calling rather than emailing too much I know that the teacher went to the resource teacher or principal or someone, because the principal spoke to me on the phone and I actually brought up the emailing to the teacher too much and she said yeah, maybe just try emailing once a week and we will try and figure out some other type of communication like a communication book. So I know that there was discussion there, as much as I didn't like it. I would have done the same thing. Plus there was a post it note on

the agenda that said, “see if this works with mom”, so I put a little smiley face on it to her response. (laugh, laugh) But it was good.

(Research conversations transcript, October 12, 2016, p. 2)

It was clear that Robyn understood that she could not email or call Carter's teacher every day. It was important to her that the school did not simply say, “Don't call anymore” but rather, “here is a communication book”, which meant a lot to her because this respectful line of communication from the school valued her input.

As I continued to ask questions about The New School, I now wondered if she had made a similar request to the resource/principal team to have a psychology assessment completed for Carter. Robyn indicated that she had requested this and she shared the story that led to the school to supporting her request:

I guess a girl was teasing Carter; at least this is how he put it. He didn't say anything at first because we have been working on not reacting. But the second recess he saw her, he thought that she was laughing at him so he said, “I can murder you”. The next day the principal called me, the girl came in with her mom and I'm glad the mom came in; I would have done the same thing. The school did a fantastic job; she used the STAR program with him. Stop Think Act Right. The program is supposed to be a review of what happened, but to also make the right choice. She spent a long time with him it was great to see. (Research conversations transcript, October 12, 2016, p. 1)

I asked, “Had you already asked for the psych assessment?” She responded:

Actually that day after I spoke with the principal, I asked for the psychologist assessment and involvement with the school social worker. I was seeing that he was starting to act out. I emailed that day (after incident), and the next day I received an email from the principal saying that the resource teacher will be in contact with her to arrange a meeting for the psychological assessment.

(Research conversations transcript, October 12, 2016, p. 2)

Even though Robyn was disappointed to hear what Carter had threatened the other student, Robyn was happy that the principal took time with Carter to work through his behaviour. The principal did not just brush him off by serving Carter a suspension. This principal used this opportunity to work with Carter and then arrange for further evaluation of Carter's social and emotional well-being. This was very important to Robyn. There was a smile on her face when she shared that the school was willing to help Carter.

I asked Robyn if she felt that this school that has Carter's best interests in mind, and, if so, how did this knowledge impact her emotionally. She replied:

It just allows me to be better at my job. I can be free; I don't need to worry about him anymore. When things are so transparent and open and functioning well at a school, I can carry it over into the evening. So now that we are in this routine, he knows what is expected of him at school, I use the same system in the evening.

(Research conversations transcript, October 12, 2016, p. 3)

I asked how Carter was feeling in the evenings now that the relationship between Robyn and The New School is strong. She noted, “His mood is much better”.

As Robyn and I sat down for our third and final conversation on January 18, 2017, she shared that she was experiencing some personal challenges, and she was currently on leave from work. She was very committed to finishing up her contribution to this study and made every effort to meet for our final conversation. I greatly appreciated her persistence and commitment to finishing her contribution to this project.

She shared at the end of our third conversation, “I just want to help, and your story growing up with a single mother and you wanting to help other mothers is special.” On our car ride to the Tim Horton’s restaurant for our sit down conversation, I said I was sorry to hear that she was on leave. She shared that the leave was an emotional build up of everything in her life and it was all just difficult to deal with. She also mentioned in the conversation that on January 19th (day after our conversation), she was meeting with her son's school psychologist to confirm an autism diagnosis. I asked her how she felt about that, and she said that she just wanted this all over with. I could tell that she was frustrated that the process of having Carter work with student services over the past couple years has been extremely challenging, especially dealing with some of the staff at Old Tom School. The process was weighing on her emotionally. Although her child attends New School, which she describes as a very good school with staff who want to partner with her, it remains challenging and emotionally difficult to listen to a psychological report discussing Carter's challenges.

To end our final meeting, Robyn shared that she was happy with Carter’s current emotional well-being and the fact that The New School was partnering with her to help

serve their family. I thanked Robyn for her willingness to share her story with me. She mentioned again that she was appreciative of being asked to participate in this research, and she hopes that her narrative will help support school change in the areas of parent and school partnership. Robyn finished by saying, “Thanks Colin, I learnt a lot about myself and this process was kind of therapeutic”.

A Narrative Account for Sarah: A Resourceful Mother

The process of securing Sarah as a participant did not occur as directly as it might have. Sarah works in the public school system, with children and families, many of whom are led by single mothers. Originally, she agreed to help me try to find a



Sarah.
Illustrated by: Kent Martens, 2017

participant, and I was hopeful that she would be able to recommend someone for my study. Not only was she willing to find a participant, but she said that she was willing to be a participant herself. Sarah is a single mother of three children ages 9, 12, and 14, and she was the first caregiver to agree to sit down and take part in this study.

Our first meeting took place on Saturday, October 8, 2016 at 10:00am. Even though Sarah was the first caregiver to participate in this study, she was the second person that I had a sit down conversation with due to scheduling constraints. I brought my iPad and iPhone to record our first sit down conversation. I also brought the Participant Waiver Form for Sarah to sign, and a journal for Sarah to take home after our conversation. This journal was available for her to use to record possible thoughts relevant to my study between conversations. I also brought my notebook with some broad stroke questions, written out ahead of time, to begin dialogue. Prior to our first sit

down conversation, I asked Sarah to write a brief outline of a typical day in her life, with times of the day and activities recorded, and bring it to our first meeting. Sarah came to our first sit down conversation with a written one-week agenda of her busy schedule. I began our conversation discussing Sarah's busy schedule.

Sarah placed her schedule on the table and we started reviewing what she had written. The first thing she said to me was, “This assignment almost made me cry because I realized how busy I am and I don’t have any time for myself” (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 1).

I could feel Sarah's comment. I did not think of the possible impact that writing a schedule down on paper might have on a participant. I felt bad for not realizing this in advance of asking. Here is another lesson learned about the need for sensitivity in working with single, busy, parents. This feeling helped me stay focused on the following questions that I asked throughout the conversation. As we began to discuss her busy schedule, it was clear that she had very little time for herself:

Actually it [the schedule] started many, many, years ago when the kids were very little, it was always very clear. When bedtime was, just like every little child needs (routine). When our marriage began to fall apart, then the schedule fell apart. My kids’ behaviours became difficult, because we were beginning to fall off the wagon. This is one of the reasons that I am passionate about the parenting groups I work with. You can see it, when a family is in chaos this reflects in the kids. By getting back to a routine, structure, and an alpha role by the parent,

things just fall into place. I know this because it has happened to me. I have fallen off the wagon and I have gotten back on the wagon. (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 1)

I first asked her to explain what “falling off the wagon” meant. She responded, “It's like when a family is in survival mode” (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 1). This situation often interferes with a family's ability to have a consistent schedule, a sense of structure, or a behaviour plan for the children. Sarah's opening comments were powerful. She talked about the importance of routines and schedules; she shared when these routines fell apart for her family and how that change led to chaos. Further, she talked about the parenting groups with whom she works professionally. It was clear at this point early in the conversation that Sarah is a thoughtful and reflective parent who understands what works for families, and what continues to work for her in leading her family. Further, she uses her education and professional research to serve other families with possibly similar experiences as her own.

When Sarah's oldest, Natasha, was in grade one, Sarah's marriage began to fall apart. There was a lot of tension in the home and she describes the household climate with the metaphor of everyone walking on eggshells. For instance, Natasha had difficulty with her reading and was provided with extra home reading. Sarah describes her perspective on how challenging completing home reading was for her and Natasha:

Their dad, he was in the police and the narcissism was insane; it went through the roof. Life was all about him. I remember one-day, he wanted to go out jogging or he went out 2 hours before his

shift started and it's like, your kids are important here. I need to do this reading. It needs to be uninterrupted and you need to give me 20 minutes, look after the other kid. That was like pulling teeth. I shouldn't have to say that. Your child needs some interventions. It was really difficult. (Research Transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 2)

When Sarah began sharing these experiences, I asked her how much of her home life she shared with the school. She added, "I didn't say anything, not a word about our family life difficulties" (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 1).

Over time, things changed. One day the school principal called Sarah out of concern because her oldest child, Natasha, was not her bubbly self. At that time, Sarah felt more comfortable sharing familial challenges and their effect on Natasha with the principal.

She said, "He listened, with no judgment and didn't belittle me. When chaos was happening in our home, the school was wonderful" (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 2).

I was curious to know if her gratitude for the principal's phone call was related to his role in the school or specifically that the school was aware of something different with Natasha's behaviour. I asked, "Would it have made a difference if another staff member called and not the principal?" Sarah replied:

I don't think it would have made a difference who had called, but I was extra happy that it was the principal because your kid doesn't feel like a number. When a principal calls you and he says he sees a difference in your kid, to me that is huge. The principal has to

take care of how many kids (lots) and to be able to pin point your child, I thought that was pretty spectacular. I expected a classroom teacher to do it. But I thought that was really comforting to know that there was somebody else noticing. As a parent you know how your child is and you try to help them through it at home but when it really starts to spill into the school environment and the classroom environment, you hope that there is someone at the school caring for them. (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 1)

I asked Sarah to share more about what made Natasha's school wonderful. She described:

Communication. You walk into the school, even if I walk into the school only twice a school year, the principal walks out of the office and greets me by name. He has 300 and some students' k-12 and he makes it a point to greet me with my name. It's huge. Huge, huge, huge. It's like I matter and my kids matter. (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 2)

I asked Sarah to share more about the school and their communication. I wanted her to expand on the wonderful things the staff were doing at the school to build and maintain a relationship with Sarah. She continued, "They didn't make me shut up, they actually listened to my story. Actually followed my guidance. They actually said, "what would you like us to do" (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 2). I interjected, "So the school was willing to serve you?" Sarah replied:

Yes! Just knowing that there was somebody there for my kids and me was phenomenal. When shit hit the fan. I called the principal and he took my privacy and my children's privacy to heart. He informed some of the staff. Well maybe all the staff but quickly got his guidance counsellor in there and involved working with my oldest. Bigger schools won't recognize this until the child is curled up in the corner. (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 3)

I asked Sarah if she had additional stories of this principal's abilities as a servant leader. Sarah began to share an extremely scary time during the Kindergarten Grad ceremony for her middle child Stephanie. After the ceremony was complete, all the families gathered with their child to take pictures and celebrate the completion of the kindergarten year. This was supposed to be a joyful time for the children and their families. Unfortunately, during the family picture time, Sarah's ex-husband's girlfriend threatened her. Sarah said, "She told me she would take me out back and make me bleed little girl" (Research conversation transcript, 2016/22/8, p. 2).

This threat took place in the school while other parents stood around watching. Unfortunately, the threat was made with a quiet enough voice that school staff did not hear the offensive language being used. Sarah was clearly scared for her own safety. Sarah had heard that her ex husband's girlfriend was in the police service. Sarah had also heard rumours that she may have been dismissed from the police department due to misconduct issues. The alleged dismissal from the police service, a position of authority and integrity, made Sarah's fear immediately grow:

So during the Kindergarten grad there were these mementoes that kids had made. They (ex-husband and girlfriend) would always be the first ones to go grab the stuff and then take pictures. I would say, “okay, my turn for family pictures”. I would let them do their thing and then I would go and take the pictures with my family. There were 3 mementoes, a diploma, DVD, and a scrapbook. So they went through the scrapbook and once they were done, I asked to look through it with my family, and after that they (ex-husband and girlfriend) just lost it. That is when she had threatened me. She went to get the DVD disc, yelling let’s get out of here, I got it, I got it. I was really scared by how she was behaving. I was standing at the back with the principal and he just said, “its okay Sarah, I’ll make you another one, don’t worry about it. Let them go”.

(Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 3)

I asked, “How did you feel when the Principal was willing to support you”? She replied, “Comforting”.

I mentioned to Sarah that the principal could have easily said that he didn’t want family matters to be taking place in the school and told them to leave? “Yes”! Sarah said, explaining further that it was not the first time the principal had supported her during some challenging times:

One day, I had a gut feeling that my ex-husband was going to just show up to the school and just take them (kids) without any planning or legal paperwork. I literally ran to the school. This

happened to be on my day off, could you believe it? I literally got to the school and threw the kids in the car and then went and picked up my youngest at daycare. The principal asked what kind of headspace was my ex husband in. I said, "I don't know. He might be power tripping." The principal asked, "Do I need to call the RCMP"? Possibly. It was reassuring that he (principal) was also human and that he also didn't know everything. He wasn't being arrogant or a know it all. (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 3)

On both occasions, the principal's support cemented a relationship of trust for Sarah by working to service Sarah's needs. I dugged a little deeper to find out if Sarah had positive relationships with the teachers in the school.

When Sarah and her husband were married, Sarah's husband worked in the town of Beaverton. Their children attended the school in the same town, which is the same school that the children currently attend. When Sarah and her husband were married, they socialized with various school staff outside of school. When staff were socializing with their family, they had great times together. But one time the school staff saw a glimpse of her husband's polarizing behaviour and what Sarah had been dealing with at home. They never expected for this man to be so rude, intimidating, and disrespectful. Sarah describes a problem that took place at parent teacher interviews:

First, my ex-husband came to the parent teacher conferences with his girlfriend. We were all sitting there listening to the teacher talk about our child. The tone and language of my ex-husband was not

polite. Not only was I angry that his girlfriend that he had an affair with was sitting in the same room as us, I was embarrassed watching his behaviour. I sat there biting my tongue. They (teachers) were just looking at me to make sure I was okay. They (teachers) were expecting me to answer questions. But they (teachers) were respectful. After that, I said that I couldn't do another parent teacher interview with him and they were completely supportive and willing to set up multiple parent teacher conference times for each of us and also set up an information box for myself and for him. (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 4)

I asked Sarah to share more about the separate mailboxes that the teacher set up for communication. She described:

This one teacher had a mailbox for each student. All parent communication went in the mailboxes and at the end of the day the students would empty their mailbox and bring the communication home to their parents. So we had two separate boxes. When he started taking the kids during the week for visits he would take the stuff from his mailbox. Even though the communication was all written in French and he couldn't read it, it was for him. Everything was divided, report cards, everything was duplicated, everything down to the envelopes. Two envelopes for the report cards. The teachers were the ones that actually said they would

make two boxes. (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 3)

This was another useful example of the school staff serving the family when the quick and easy response could have been to tell the family to figure out their own problems. I mentioned that, outside of the report card duplication for each parent, the school did not have to provide two parent teacher-meeting times or separate communication mailboxes.

Sarah said, “Yes they could have said that, again the relief, I don't know if it was because it's a small town school” (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 4). I could see a sense of relief on Sarah's face when she was sharing her story. She felt the willingness of the school staff to serve her personal needs.

At the midpoint of our second conversation, it was clear that the school communicates very well. In addition, the principal of this school understands that establishing respect and trust with parents and caregivers is important in the process of serving families. With this said, I wanted to go back to the beginning of our first conversation and talk about her busy schedule. I specifically wanted to know if the school could have a positive or negative affect on the sense of routine that she has passionately instilled in her family. Sarah stated:

I think there are a couple negative things a school can do. If my children were kids with behavioural problems and the school was constantly calling me saying, ‘your kid did this and that’. If they are putting all the pressure on the parent(s), I don’t think that is going to solve any problem especially if the family is in crisis

mode. If the parent(s) already feel very powerless and have no idea what to do about their child's behaviour, school staff calling home insinuating that the parent(s) needs to fix their child, will be problematic and challenging for the parent and staff to build a relationship. (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 7)

It was apparent with Sarah's answer to my question that she was speaking hypothetically about her children. Further, Sarah was speaking, in part, through the lens of an experienced professional who regularly works with parents/ caregivers. I wanted to explore Sarah's professional perspectives on the relationship between parents and school staff. Sarah elaborated further about school staff calling home, explaining that the purpose and the nature of this communication requires thoughtful consideration:

If the school is always insinuating, during parent conversations, fix him/her, you (parent) fix them, then there is a problem. If there isn't a fix then there is the "what's wrong with you" feeling that the parent can feel. But if the school says "we're noticing this at school, I'm sure you are noticing this at home. How can we help each other? We need this to change here at school and I'm sure you need this to change at home. So lets work together". That's huge. (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 4)

With about ten minutes remaining in our second sit down conversation, Sarah mentioned she had written down a couple notes in her journal after our first sit down conversation and wanted to share them. Both points were from her professional

perspective. The first point she wanted to make was in regards to the beginning stages of parental divorce:

I think when families are in crises mode as a result of a divorce, they can also be financially struggling. For example, I had all the bills to pay in our home with no alimony; I should say a lot of bills! I had to work two jobs. I had to live on credit cards for food and gas just to go to work. Babysitting on top of that is insane. I didn't have any money left at the end of the week. If I had to pick up my child from school all the time, my job would have fired me. I would have had to go on welfare. So if you look at those families who have recently separated/divorced and school is asking for stuff like money for field trips or crafts, that can be difficult. When the school asked for 4 dollars for this and 5 dollars for that. That was tough. (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 4)

I asked how she would have appreciated the school asking for such funds. Sarah said, "Ask for the money at the beginning of the year. Have teachers ask for an extra \$20 and we won't ask for any more money all year. So being up front in October not September, something up front. It's the last minuteness that is the problem. This would be less stressful". (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 6).

Sarah wanted to mention the impact a divorce can have on children as well. It is also important to understand that everyone handles the impact of divorce differently:

When a parent dies, schools tend to be very supportive for a very long time. Mom died and it's the anniversary... It's mothers day... it's this and it's that. There is a lot more empathy towards a death of the parent. To some children a divorce or a separation is a death to them and the empathy for this can be missing. I would say it is more chaotic at homes during any hostile environments. There is extra anxiety because the hostile parent is in and out and in and out of the house. With the death in the family the children know that the parent isn't coming back. (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 6)

Sarah elaborated further:

So the empathy is important. If a child is having a bad day, give the child a chance, how about you go for a little break, a little hug might help too and it shows the child that the teacher cares. If you think about your experience with your favourite teacher as a child (my grade 6 teacher who played badminton with me during his lunch hour) if it wasn't for that one teacher to give you that attention where would you be? So that's what I mean the teacher might gravitate towards a child who's parent died but is less likely to gravitate to that child if their parents are divorced. (Research Transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 6)

Sarah shared that the first year of separation from her husband was difficult for Natasha, who experienced constant anxiety problems. She even shared that she wanted

to kill herself at one point. Sarah also shared that, although Natasha did not want to see her father and at the age of seven, she was legally required to have visits with him. This caused a lot of stress for Natasha and she still had to go to school Monday morning after a stressful weekend visit with her father. She still needed a teacher or someone at school to support her emotionally when it was needed.

I wanted to finish our conversation with one final question. I asked, “Were there times that you felt that the school was treating you in a negative way because you were (are) a single mother?” She replied, “No, I don’t think so. No, I’m a single mother and I’m proud of it” (Research Transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 7).

During our third and final conversation on January 28, 2017, we sat down together at her home, each with a copy of her narrative that I had written. The mood was one of excitement and nervousness. Sarah was excited to hear what I had written, and I was nervous because she was going to read what I had written about her. As we began reading, we made minor changes at the beginning to make sure Sarah was comfortable with her anonymity as written. As I continued to read on and as we reached page 3, I could see Sarah getting a little restless. I asked if she was okay and needed me to stop. Sarah replied, “No, I’m fine, it’s just hard to hear what is written but I’m okay”.

I asked again if she would like me to stop reading. Sarah replied, “No, please continue, this is good, I’ll be fine”.

I continued reading and with minor changes throughout her written narrative, we completed the read through. I asked her what she thought of the written narrative? Sarah said, “It is very good.”

I apologized for any discomfort that she may have felt at the beginning of our read through. Sarah said, “That's okay, when we started reading, it just caught me off guard and the tears just started coming”. She shared further, “I thank you for asking me to participate, I learnt a lot about myself during this process, I have come a long way emotionally and with my family”.

I thanked her for sharing her story. I said that I would share her story in an authentic and engaging manner. Sarah finished by saying, “Thanks Colin”.

A Narrative Account of Tara: A Determined Mother

I contacted a local Not-for-Profit organization with which I have networked in the past as a school principal. I spoke with the director, Lisa, and explained my project.



Tara.
Illustrated by Kent Martens, 2017

Knowing that she works with a number of single parents, I asked her if she would hand out my participant recruitment poster to single mothers in hopes of finding a participant. She contacted me three weeks later with the contact information for Tara. Lisa told me that Tara was waiting for my call.

I called Tara later that day to explain my project and thank her for considering to participate in this study. It was clear that she was in a rush; she was at the hospital for a follow up appointment for her son, who had broken his leg during the summer. I offered to contact her another time but she was determined to make the call work, for which I was very thankful. We ended up losing cellphone reception and we were unable to reconnect via cellphone. I sent her a text message arranging our first sit down conversation. Our first conversation took place a week later, October 27th, at 11:00am at a local cafe.

I felt confident after completing work with the first two participants. I knew that being relaxed and prepared for the first sit down conversation was important. I felt this showed the participant that I was taking her story seriously. I arrived ten minutes early and sent her a text informing her where I was sitting. I had brought my participant waiver to be signed, and my notebook with a couple broad stroke questions to begin a conversation. She arrived on time, we shook hands, and I thanked her for her willingness to participate in this study. I shared with her that she was the third and final participant in this study and then I proceeded to review the waiver, which she signed. I told her I would turn on my voice recorder as we began talking.

We were both aware of who had connected us together for this sit down conversation; I began asking Tara how she knew Lisa. Tara spoke about meeting Lisa when she was taking courses to finish her grade 12, as she had dropped out of High School. Tara explained that she had dropped out because she was disengaged academically. Additionally, she became pregnant in grade 10, and she moved out of home. Tara shared that she felt her life went downhill at the time of being pregnant as this was a life changing moment for her. I mentioned to her that perhaps life sped up rather than going downhill. She nodded interestingly. She then talked about her two boys, Dawson (10 yrs. old), and Anthony (15 yrs. old), who kept her busy, especially her ten year old Dawson:

You see, my kids have ADHD; there are two kinds of ADHD. One is progressive and one that is hyperactive. My oldest (Anthony) has the progressive kind and my youngest (Dawson) has the

hyperactive kind. (Research conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p.1)

In September 2006, Tara's oldest child began kindergarten at East Side Elementary School. At this time Tara, Anthony (5) and Dawson (>1) were renting a small home within walking distance to the school. Due to the proximity of their home to the school, there was no transportation offered by the school division. Tara would bundle her newborn up every morning and walk Anthony to school, even when the temperature dropped below -30 Degrees Celsius. Tara describes her experiences in this school as one of the worst experiences for her family. I asked her to describe the main concerns she had:

You see, um, my son is native; they just never wanted to work with him. He went to preschool and he knew his colours and he knew his ABC's. Well, they said he didn't know his colours and ABC's. Really! So he was pushed off to the corner. That's one of the reasons I switched schools. (Research conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p. 7)

I asked Tara to explain further why she felt that possibly racism played a role in her frustration towards this school. When Tara would either drop him off or pick him up from school, the teachers never paid attention to him. When she would pick him up from school and they were all sitting in a circle, Anthony would be wandering around the room, and from what Tara observed, the teacher did not ask him to join the group. In addition to not including Anthony in the class setting, the school shared that he was struggling academically with his letters and numbers, but Tara was aware that he did

know his letters and numbers. In her view, the teachers had not tried enough to work with Anthony to learn that he did know his colours and numbers. Both these concerns impacted any possibility of a partnership between the teacher and Tara.

I asked, “What was the other reason for your move?” She replied, “Transportation and our apartment was feeling too small” (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 3).

After one year at Eastside Elementary School, Tara moved her family to the other side of town, and she found an apartment in a catchment area that provided school transportation. She said that Anthony’s new school, Northwood, was the best he had attended because the school was on her side. I asked her what that looked like.

She replied:

They (teachers) were helping him read. He was in a reading program and a math program. I said I want him on the list to have him diagnosed because the programs he was in there he was showing signs of some concern. (Research conversation transcript, transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 5)

The members of the school told Tara there was not a significant concern, but they would add him to the psychologist assessment list. I asked Tara to elaborate further regarding how she felt the school staff was actually partnering with her. She described that they listened to her requests. This school staff wanted to sit down with her and have a meeting. They listened to Tara share her concerns regarding Anthony's learning disability and his struggles with literacy and numeracy. I felt that there must be more details in the language and culture in the school that made her feel this way. Tara

described that communication occurred with respect and understanding, and information was delivered without judgment:

Say for an example if he forgot his lunch, some schools would rudely say, you didn't send your child with a lunch or that this is how it would come across. Northwood was more understanding with stuff like that. I didn't really have any issues. (Research conversation transcript, 2016/11/7, p.5)

Tara was simply grateful that this school did not assume Tara forgot to make Anthony's lunch. She appreciated their kind tone on the phone and genuine concern that Anthony somehow did not have a lunch for the day.

Even though Tara had found a school that she felt was partnering with her, their home, a rental trailer, became unsafe after a mouse infestation. To compound problems, the heat did not always work. When the pipes froze, she began looking for a safe place to move her family. As a result, she had to move again to a different community and change schools again.

When she moved to the community of Lowburg, Anthony was 8 years old and her youngest son, Dawson, was 2 years old. Anthony was registered at Arlington school, which was a K-8 public school. Tara shared that the first couple years went well with very few problems. Unfortunately, her description of the relationship between herself and Arlington School changed dramatically once Dawson began Kindergarten.

During the first month of school, when riding the school bus, Tara said that Dawson started getting picked on by some older boys, and the conversation with the school principal did not go well:

My oldest went to this school too, so I had him seeing what was going on the bus. But the principal was one of those principals that do absolutely nothing. If I had issues, I would just go to the vice principal, he would try and do something. She did nothing.

(Research Conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p. 4)

She shared further:

One kid was always picking on my kid. My kid goes to school wearing nice clothes and comes home with a ripped shirt cause this kid would rip it. So the kid one day kicked my son, so my son doesn't take shit so he fights back. So he kicked this kid and got in trouble and the other kid got off. They (school) see what he does and not the other kids. (Research conversation, October 10, 2016, p.2)

Another example of the principal's dislike towards Dawson came in grade 3 when Dawson was brought to the office for trying to flush mitts down the toilet

There were a bunch of kids in there (bathroom) and I guess the kids were flushing things down the toilet. When my kid was younger he tried to do something like this at home and I gave him crap, so I know that he would not do this again. Well according to the principal, Dawson wanted to also flush mitts down the toilet and so he was the only one that got in trouble. (Research conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p. 2)

Tara never argued the fact that her son should own his role in these behaviour problems; she simply feels to this day that the principal did not like Dawson or herself and he showed biases against both of them. She felt that the principal was making it known that Dawson was a troublemaker, and Tara suspected that the teachers believed this too.

Tara's feelings were confirmed when it was Meet your Teacher Day as Dawson was entering Grade 3: “.... We met the teacher and she said, ‘oh this is the trouble maker’” (Research conversation transcript October 10, 2016, p. 2).

I could see how frustrated Tara was with this treatment towards her son. She became red in the face as she stopped talking for a second and took a sip of coffee. Tara further explained, “Not impressed, you see I (as a child) went to this school. It was decent. If you needed help you got some help. Yes it was smaller but still” (Research conversation transcript October 10, 2016, p. 2).

Dawson is now in grade 5. Over the summer, he severely broke his leg. A door fell on him, and he fractured his growth plate. Consequently, Dawson had to have surgery to have pins put in his legs to alleviate future problems. He began school in a cast and crutches. Tara personally visited the school with a doctor's note explaining to his teacher that Dawson was not to go outside for recess, especially in the rain. To start the school year, Tara drove Dawson to school and picked him up afterwards. She shared that she felt that his teacher did not want her to do this anymore:

Just her actions, actions speak louder than words. Their actions like he should be taking the bus. I just felt that they felt annoyed with me. I remember when I was a kid and broke my leg; someone

was fooling around taking my crutches and the teacher said, “Hey give her back her crutches so she can get into school”. You know, they were a little more understanding. (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 7)

I asked Tara, “If I had a child that attended this school, do you feel that they would treat me the same?” She replied, ““Probably, I don't know. What I do know is that they don't like me. Oh well, suck it up.” I asked her how she felt about that, and she said, “I feel that everyone there knows each other and I don't. I feel like I am an outcast as soon as I walk in there.” When I asked her why she felt that way, Tara answered, “I don't know, I've always felt that way living out there” (Research Conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p.7).

During our first conversation, Tara shared that her boys both had ADHD. Considering Tara was having extreme difficulty working with Arlington School, I wanted her to share her experiences working with the school in relation to Dawson's learning needs. I specifically asked her to talk about her experiences with having her child medicated daily for ADHD. Tara described:

He was on the 27s (pill dose) and I took him off of it because he was kind of getting zoned out and had an attitude with me. So I put him back down to the lower dose. They (school principal) basically told me they wanted him on the higher dose at the 27s because he is calm. Even the teachers said that. I told them that I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to drug my kids because you guys can't handle him. These medications aren't working for him. He is going

back down to the lower dose. (Research conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p. 4)

During the second conversation, I wanted to unpack further how this conversation between Tara and the school went regarding Dawson and his medication. She reiterated the above quote from our first conversation. I wanted to know more about how the conversation specifically went. She said that the conversation was with the principal. As a principal, I was surprised by this information. If there is a concern about a child's medical history at my school, there would be a meeting with the resource teacher, the classroom teacher, and the primary caregiver.

Tara shared, "the principal called me. I never dealt with the resource teacher? I dealt with the principal and the guidance counsellor." I asked her to talk to me about that phone call. She shared, "The teacher went to the principal and then the principal called me and said that we want him on the higher dose because he isn't concentrating at school." When I asked her what they said when she refused, Tara responded, "They went quiet. I'm his mother" (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 9).

She further shared that there was no behaviour plan for him at school of which she was aware. Tara knows that Dawson is a handful and that he has some behaviour problems at school. At one point Tara shared with the principal that when Dawson gets mad at home, he goes to his room until he is calm, and then he returns when he is feeling better. Tara said, "I asked the school if he gets mad, is there a room or a place he can calm down? They said, no sorry we don't do that" (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 9).

During our first conversation, Tara spoke about a time that she went to the school to meet the new principal. Tara decided to talk to the principal about her son's medications so that she was aware. The new principal was apparently well aware of who Tara was without even meeting her. Tara shared the following:

Okay I still didn't have that feeling of fully working together.

Even now. I met with the (NEW) principal, just to meet with her. And even when I first met the principal last year. The old principal must have said well we have issue with "this kid" (Dawson). Seriously, I'm here to work with you but you're saying this to the incoming principal. So what is it? (Research conversation transcripts, October 10, 2016, p. 3)

It was clear that Tara felt defeated even before she was able to introduce herself to the new principal. Tara and Dawson had looked forward to having a fresh start, hoping for a closer partnership than Tara had with the previous principal. Unfortunately, the outgoing principal had shared her opinions of Tara to the incoming principal, who took on those perceptions before ever meeting with Tara.

Another incident at school with the new principal occurred when Tara spoke to the principal about her ex-partner. She explained to the principal that Dawson did not know his father, and had nothing to do with his father. Tara thought this was important to share with the principal because she did not have any legal documents on file stating that she has full custody of Dawson. As Tara spoke with the principal in her office, her ex-partner stood just outside the principal's office waiting with the secretaries. Tara

explained further that to make problems slightly more complicated, her ex had other children that attend the school too.

The problem with the conversation was the response that the principal provided her. Tara said, "She (principal) kind of had this big smile on her face, like is this set up, you know." I asked further, "your point was that he doesn't have anything to do with his dad?" She replied, "No (in agreement), he doesn't have anything to do with my son. And she (principal) said, why he is here?" Tara said, "Because he has other children that go to school here. I have no idea why he is in the office."

I mentioned, "the fact that she was questioning you, from what it sounds like was the biggest insult." Tara said, "Well exactly." I asked her how the meeting might have gone if she had a magic wand. Tara answered, "I wish she didn't have that grin on her face and just understand where I'm coming from" (Research Conversation November 7, 2016, p. 2).

The lack of empathy and ignorance demonstrated by the principal towards Tara and her living arrangements led to me asking whether she felt a continual need to defend herself with the school. "Oh yes." I asked her to elaborate on her quick response:

There are more single parents now and it seems like the single parents have more issues to deal with now. You get looked upon as a bad person. I'm a bad person in my son's eyes. I'm looked upon as a bad parent and I'm not trying to do anything. I'm trying my hardest. With the old principal, I didn't get along with her. I still sat down with her and talked about this. (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 3)

Tara's feeling of helplessness was also apparent when communicating with the principal regarding her oldest son, Anthony. When they had moved to Arlington School and Anthony was in grade 3, she specifically told the school staff that he had been diagnosed with a learning disability. Tara shared, "Even when I told the school he has a learning disability. I had him diagnosed outside of the school and they still said no he doesn't." I asked her how this made her feel. She replied:

Even when I told them he has an anger issue they said, "we don't see that here, he doesn't have any problems". But when I'm trying to explain to them they don't believe me. Finally one day, Anthony took a hockey stick and hit somebody. So you know, then the red flags happened. I told them that he has an anger issue. I have it down on paper from a doctor outside of the school that he has a learning disability. (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p.3)

As Tara continued to work with the school, she would take initiative speaking with the principal and keeping staff up-to-date with her children's medications. She felt that she was doing the best job she could, but this effort was not good enough for the principal. She began to worry about what the school might do if she continued to not meet their expectations. Tara shared, "I told her (old principal), 'I don't need you calling CFS [Child and Family Services] on me'. She said, 'no, we are working together'" (Research conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p. 5). I asked Tara to share exactly when the old principal had said this to her. She said that it was at the time that Dawson was in the vice principal's office for a meeting about some of his concerning behaviours.

At one point, the vice principal left the office with Dawson sitting alone. Dawson decided to take the vice principal's cellphone. Tara said that after this happened, the first principal wanted to work together, and that was when she had made the comment about CFS.

It was interesting to me that the principal showed interest in working with Tara after Dawson's behaviour directly impacted the vice principal. Prior to this incident, the principal would discipline Dawson and then send him home or back to class with a punishment. The principal might have called Tara, but the general conversation was to simply share what Dawson had done and what his punishment was, without working together with Tara to create preventative options.

During our third and final sit down conversation on January 16, 2017, Tara shared that one of Dawson's teachers had called CFS about her. The teacher reported that Dawson came to school with a bruise on his lower back. She shared that because he is native, he has a special birthmark on his lower back. Some days it is visible, and some days it is not visible. Further, the mark can change colors from black to dark purple. At the time the teacher had called CFS, the birthmark was purple. From Tara's perspective, the teacher was accusing her of hitting her child because his lower back was purple, when, in reality, his birthmark had changed colour, as it does regularly.

At this moment in our conversation, Tara looked like she had no idea what to do after she heard this comment from the Principal. It must be difficult to foster a partnership with a school when CFS might be used as a lever of power when a parent does not comply with the expectations of school personnel.

As Tara described her tireless efforts to develop a collaborative relationship with the school, I began to wonder how she had time to maintain a job.

She replied, “I’m not working now. It’s easier now. But when I try and find a job, I need a job to be flexible around my schedule. This year is better but...” I asked further, “Do you feel that having to get called into the school all the time is not helping you find a job?” She replied, “yes.”

Our first sit down conversation was held in late October, which was roughly six weeks into the school year. Receiving what she describes as “only” two phone calls to come and pick up her child might seem like an improvement from previous years, but using that rate as an estimate, Tara could potentially be asked to pick her son up from school 10-12 times per year. Her relationship with her child's school is not only affecting her emotionally, but any possible working career has been on hold due to this “partnership”, which requires her to be immediately available to pick up her son upon the school’s request (Research conversation transcript, October 10, 2016, p. 7).

As our third and final conversation was ending, I asked how her children were doing at school. Tara shared that she had received only one more phone call since our last conversation six weeks ago. I asked if there were any improvements with her relationship between herself and the staff at the school. She shared that things have not necessarily improved but stayed the same, and this stagnancy perpetuated a reactive, rather than a proactive, relationship.

In the following chapter, I unpack the three narrative accounts that have been shared by Robyn, Sarah, and Tara. Their stories offer insight into the complex lives of single mothers and the immediacy of impact that school staff decisions can have on the

lives, emotions, and learning outcomes for children and families. School staff members may be “experts” in their field, but they are not necessarily “experts” in dealing with the personal realities faced by single mothers. The positioning of authority in the relationship between home and school generally privileges the points of view of school staff at the expense of the parent, and single mothers are often placed in precarious positions in their efforts to support the learning needs of their children. Throughout chapter 5, I also include the impact that these narratives have had on my perspective as a researcher, as a school principal, as a parent, as a man, and as a child of a single mother in my concluding thoughts.

Chapter 5: What I have learned from the Lives of Single Mothers

In this chapter I unpack each individual narrative that has been shared by Robyn, Tara, and Sarah. Single mothers are not a “homogenous group” (Munn cited in Hornby, 2011, p. 19), therefore I share the impact their individual experiences had on their relationship with their child's school. At times, there will be similarities in the problems between parent and school but the emotional impact and the feelings are unique or each participant. These similarities and differences will be discussed throughout the chapter.

I focused on the individuality of each participant's narrative within what I refer to as “tapestries,” related to the topic of the relationship between parents and school staff. Using tapestries as a metaphor, Webster defines tapestries as, “something made up of different things, people, and colors” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2017). I found this concept useful for this research because the complexities of each story provided some natural similarities that must be explained in a manner that respects that individuality of these women's stories. Much like a tapestry, each story is unique, intricate, and multi-layered.

My three research puzzles are: *what are the experiences of single mothers in the Manitoba public school system, how do these experiences impact their relationships with their children's school, and how can school staff reshape their operations to increase collaboration with single mothers?* In chapter 4, I shared each participant's experiences in the form of a narrative; I will now address each research puzzle through the tapestries that are woven between each narrative. There are four tapestries that I will address: (1) communication, (2) attitudes, (3) value, and (4) trust. These tapestries have emerged from the three narrative accounts I constructed, which confirm my syntheses of the

research focusing on parent and school relationships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hornby, 2011; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003, 2015; Turnbull *et al.*, 2011).

The stories shared by each participant provided me with a window into their storied lives. I am able to address my first research puzzle, which focuses on the *experiences* of each participant. I first discuss the tapestries of communication, attitudes, and value. I discuss my second research puzzle, which focuses on the *impact* of these lived experiences using the fourth tapestry of trust. The third and final research puzzle focuses on *reshaping* values, attitudes, and communication by building relationships of trust between single mothers and teachers and principals at their child's school.

The Experiences of Each Mother

Communication

As Turnbull *et al.* (2011) explain, “effective communication requires that we pay careful attention to both the quality and the quantity of our communication” (p. 139). Communication is a strong component of a healthy partnership between a school staff and parents. Turnbull *et al.* (2011) discuss five characteristics of effective communication: be friendly, listen, be clear, be honest, and provide and coordinate information (p. 139). The following aspects of communication form the threads of this particular tapestry in the research.

Friendly approach. Sarah and Robyn each described an exchange with a person that became a friendly and positive experience. These friendly approaches made a strong first impression that helped Sarah and Robyn feel comfortable with the members of their child's school. Turnbull *et al.* (2011) explain that to be friendly means to be less formal, distant, and controlling when communicating with family members (p. 139). For

example, Robyn shared that at Old Tom School, the guidance counsellor Mr. McKay was friendly and welcoming, which was consistent with Hornby's (2011) recommendation that parental involvement should be welcomed. Mr. McKay was willing to open his office door or talk on the phone with Robyn at any time. As Robyn explained, "it just felt like he was taking my suggestions" (Research conversation transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 4). A possible reason for this quick and positive first impression might be that the counsellor did continue the "expert" narrative, but, rather, positioned himself as someone who cares about and wants to listen to Robyn. Mr. McKay listened and was willing to take suggestions to improve the relationship and learning experience for Robyn's son Carter. As a result of Mr. McKay taking a friendly approach with Robyn, this made his office a safe physical place within the school where Robyn felt comfortable. There were no other places in the school where she had felt this way. Unfortunately, when Mr. McKay moved on to a different school, Robyn had lost this safe place within the school, and the school was no longer a safe place for her.

The Principal at the school Sarah's children attended was very friendly. Not only was he compassionate in conversation with Sarah, he would always remember Sarah and addressed her by her name:

You walk into the school, even if I walk into the school only twice a school year, the principal walks out of the office and greets me by my name. He has 300 and some students' K-12 and he makes it a point to greet me with my name. It's huge. Huge, huge, huge. It's like I matter and my kids matter. (Research conversation transcript, October 8, 2016, p. 2)

Having the principal be the first person to introduce her/himself given her/his role of authority is powerful for parents. This was a crucial moment that allowed Sarah to experience the beginnings of a trusting parent/school relationship. At that moment, with a simple hello and greeting by name, Sarah now felt comfortable approaching the principal.

Listening. Tara and Robyn had a number of different examples where they each felt the teachers and principals with whom they communicated with were simply not listening to them. At Old Tom School, Robyn asked profusely for Carter to be assessed because of the social, emotional, and academic concerns she had with him at school. Considering Robyn is an educator who understands that resources are available for all students, she knew that the teacher and principal still abused their power and authority by ‘brushing Robyn off’, telling her that Carter's behaviour and academic struggles were not bad enough to warrant assessment. Turnbull *et al.* (2011) explain that when a staff member is listening empathetically, s/he is not listening to agree or disagree, but rather simply to understand the parent (p. 140). Carter's teacher used her power as the expert and was less willing to accommodate Robyn with her request, or, to listen empathetically to Robyn's concerns.

Tara experienced a number of moments when the principal would not communicate with her prior to making decisions about/for her child. One of the more impactful moments that Tara experienced was when the principal called her directly at home. Without notice or a meeting the principal asked Tara to increase her child's medication because he was having difficulty focusing at school. This phone call angered Tara, who explained “The teacher went to the principal and then the principal called me

and said that we want him on the higher dose because he isn't concentrating at school.” Tara said “no”, that she did not want her child to be walking around at home like a “zombie” (Research conversation transcript, October 20, 2016, p. 4). The principal did not like her response and continued to push the issue. When Tara declined for a final time, “they [the principal] went quiet. I'm his mother” (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 9). Once again the power that this principal was leveraging was a dominant marker in the relationship with Tara and her child, and there was little opportunity for an equal partnership to develop between Tara and the principal. Listening to Tara share her response to the principal's action was uplifting to me. Looking at her home as a place within her narrative, I wondered if she felt more comfortable on the phone in her own home. There were no other moments in her story where she had mentioned that she held her ground with the principal than when she was speaking with him on the phone. I wonder further if it was strategic for the principal to make the phone call to Tara, rather than having a collaborative face-to-face conversation.

Sarah had quite the opposite experience of being heard by the educators in her children's school. Sarah had the courage to share with the principal and teacher what home life was like and how the family was dealing with these problems at home: “They didn't make me shut up, they actually listened to my story. Actually followed my guidance. They actually said, ‘what would you like us to do’” (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 2). The sensitivity that the principal and the teacher showed Sarah was what allowed her to trust and feel safe to share her experiences. This helped school staff gain perspective in how to serve her family.

Being clear. Tara's narrative described incidences where the school staff members did not provide clear explanations. For example, this occurred when the principal at Tara's school explained to her that she would not call Child and Family Services because they were working together. The principal's perspective was not clear to Tara from the onset of the working relationship. This confusing explanation could be perceived as a coded language that the principal assumed parents are able to understand. Turnbull *et al.* (2011) explains being clear is based on a principle that people (i.e., parents) might not have received formal training in the areas discussed and they may have a difficult time reciprocating communication. The purpose of being clear is for the school staff to provide transparency in their decision-making. Transparency provides opportunity for parents to begin trusting the school staff's authenticity of wanting positive school/parent partnerships.

Even though Robyn is an educator with student services experience, she was still challenged by communication patterns. She had to communicate her suggestions for improvement more than once, and to multiple people. Robyn shared that at times it was frustrating to have to re-explain Carter's problems each time she called. Robyn would take time to speak with Mr. McKay about struggles Carter was having at home, but when she talked to Carter's teacher later that week, the teacher was unaware of the conversation. For this reason, "parents need to know about their rights and responsibilities" (Hornby, 2011, p. 35). This lack of collaboration was problematic and frustrating for Robyn because it felt that the staff members were not communicating or working together. The infrequent communication among the educators in this school shines some light on the social conditions within the school, and may be worth further

investigation. Fortunately, Robyn seemed undeterred by the intimidation and stall tactics she felt from school staff.

Being honest. It is important for school staff to have an honest relationship with their students' parents. Staff must be sensitive to how parents will react when communicating with them. Sarah's narrative provided a number of moments where the principal had been very tactful in his approach to being honest. A stand out moment during the conversation process with Sarah was when she shared how the principal initiated conversation about her oldest child Natasha. The principal called Sarah to let her know that Natasha was not her bubbly self. "When a principal calls you and he says he sees a difference in your kid, to me that is huge" (Research conversation transcript, October 22, 2016, p. 1). This was the first moment that Sarah began to trust the principal. Turnbull *et al.* (2011) explain that for school staff to be honest, they need to find a way to be tactful in their approach. The principal was tactful, open, and willing to make decisions on what to do with Natasha's difficulties by including her mother.

Hornby (2011) speaks to the importance of maintaining open communication; "the most important factor in maintaining good communication is the openness to parents that school demonstrate through their contacts with parents" (p. 35). This means that when staff have possibly sensitive information to communicate with families, they should think about how parents might react and tailor their communication. As Sarah shared her experience with the principal, I began to reflect on my mother's reaction to the conversation with my principal regarding my suspension from school. Would my mother have felt less frustrated with the principal if he had already spoken to my mother about the positive behaviors I had shown at school? Would a proactive phone call sharing my

successes at school provided a more comfortable conversation between my mother and the principal? These are questions that I do not have an answer for, but are worth consideration if schools are to be reconstructed as a collaborative space for single mothers.

Robyn had quite different experiences, as the principal and teachers struggled to communicate in an honest and transparent way. Robyn shared her experience with having the counsellor from Manitoba Adolescence Treatment Center (MATC) come with her to a meeting at the school. Robyn went into this meeting feeling confident because she had a partner around the table who was there to support her. Instead, “She said her role was to provide me with parenting skills. I didn’t like that and I felt that at that time. It made me feel incapable” (Research conversations transcript, September 24, 2016, p. 10). Even though the counsellor from MATC was not a school staff member, the approach to explaining why she was in attendance at the meeting was not tactful. Further, as Robyn explains, the school staff may have misinterpreted what the counsellor was meaning to say which was that she was there to support Robyn in any way she could during the meeting. What may have been helpful here is for the principal and the resource team to make themselves aware of the services that are offered to parents in their community. If the principal had been aware of these services, he would not have had to ask why the counsellor was present in the meeting. This approach might have shifted the school staff’s thinking from a narrative of victimization (e.g. “poor Robyn needs a counsellor to support her”), to a narrative of collaboration. The literature (Hornby, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) does not go in-depth enough in this dominant victimization narrative, and it may be worthwhile to do so in order to

prevent an unbalanced relationship between parent and school administrators. This is important because parents view school staff as having power and authority to make decisions without needing to involve parents. If parents are perceived as victims of relationship problems with educators, then building an equitable partnership will be difficult.

A surprising moment in Tara's narrative came when she shared how Dawson's teacher felt about Tara dropping Dawson off at school when he had a cast on his leg. This was an example of perceived non-verbal communication. As a result, Tara was left feeling very offended: "Just her actions, actions speak louder than words. Their actions like he should be taking the bus. I just felt that they felt annoyed with me" (Research conversation transcript, November 7, 2016, p. 7). If this was the case, Dawson's teacher lacked tactfulness in her approach to informing Tara what her problem was with her coming in to the school to pick her son up. Further, the teacher misused her position. As per the *Manitoba Public Schools Act* (2015), a parent can have access to the school. Being honest here would mean that the teacher would have asked Tara to meet privately to discuss the problem. For example, she could have proposed that Tara drop Dawson off at a different location or time, which would meet the needs of Tara, Dawson and the school.

Providing and coordinating information. Parents want to know what current and future services are available to them and want relevant and practical information about those services. Throughout Tara's narrative, it was interesting that her main contact person at Arlington School was the principal and not the teacher, which supports Hornby's (2011) claim that parents need to communicate with multiple school actors. I

asked Tara numerous times during the conversation if she met with the school team to discuss these problems, such as developing behaviour plan. The answer was always no; Tara never received this kind of opportunity. This lack of coordination provided Tara with very little direction as to what services she could access through the school. More importantly, from Tara's perspective, the only ideas to support her boys at school came from the principal. Establishing the principal as the number one contact leads me to think that the staff did not have the professional capacity to serve Tara's children, or the principal has asserted him/herself inappropriately as the sole communication link between teacher and parents. It is much easier for the principal to take the calls from a parent and persuade the parent that the school knows best and that the parent should listen to the school staff.

In Robyn's narrative, the guidance counsellor informed her that there was a hockey program that would be great for Carter. A couple months later, the principal shared with her that Carter was not able to participate in the hockey program. This was a pivotal moment for her relationship with the teacher and principal at Old Tom School. She shared that this was one of the first frustrating moments in her relationship with the principal at Carter's school. The guidance counsellor or the principal had not provided the correct information on the future services that were available. From Robyn's perspective, this experience decreased the reliability and credibility she had placed in the principal. Tschannen-Moran (2015) explains the meaning of reliability in the context of the school, "reliability means following through on decisions and promises" (p. 263). Further, parents want to know and be assured that they can count on the principal or teacher to make informed and helpful decisions. School staff telling Robyn one thing and

then changing their mind was frustrating for Robyn, especially when she saw Carter's disappointment. This decision, made by the principal, explains to me that the principal will make decisions that might be best for the school, but not for the student. This approach deviates from a servant leadership focus, which recommends that leaders maintain focus on the purpose for which they are serving (Sipe & Frick, 2009).

Clear communication between school staff and a single parent is vital. Single parents have unique family situations and may not have the time in their day to communicate throughout the day via email or take time off work to attend school meetings (Epstein, 2011; Griffith & Smith, 2005). These stories suggest poor communication between parent and school staff, which resonated with the frustrations that my mother felt in dealing with my childhood schools. My mother worked full time and her job did not always allow her to make personal phone calls. It was important for the school to communicate information accurately and timely, as my mother was busy at work. As a principal, I try to be accurate and responsive with the information being communicated to parents. These narratives had me consider family diversity in my communications.

Communication with single parents must occur within the approach of service. It is helpful for school staff to try to accommodate the needs of each parent individually. As Sipe and Frick (2009) wrote in *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership*, “a humble leader is likely to make better decision, based on broader, more diverse information and analysis” (p. 28). Leaders who lead with humility are less likely to be viewed as the experts in the parent/school partnership.

Communication between parents is multifaceted. As Turnbull *et al.* (2011) share, the five characteristics that contribute to sound communication between school staff and parents are; to be friendly, listen, be clear, and provide coordinated information. Each narrative provided lived examples of both strong and poor communication. This study contributes to the extensive literature (Epstein, 2011; Hornby, 2011; Turnbull *et al.*, 2011; Tschannen-Moran 2015) on productive communication between school staff and families. Based on the data, I suggest that Turnbull *et al.*'s (2011) five characteristics may very well be dependent on the attitudes of the staff. Some may be very supportive, and some will not be. It becomes a matter of ensuring that *all* staff members maintain high communication with single mothers.

School Staff Attitudes

The second tapestry focuses on the *attitudes* of school staff towards parental involvement in a child's education (Hornby, 2011). To add some depth to this tapestry, Jones *et al.* (1997) state that “teacher attitude is considered to be one’s perceptions and ideas about the effectiveness of parents’ instructional support of their children at home” (Jones *et al.*, 1997, p. 154). This is important because, directly or indirectly educators bring their own personal beliefs to the conversations. Further as Hornby (2011) explains, currently a majority of the attitudes expressed by staff target the deficit model. The deficit model focuses on the perception that single mothers are “less able” rather than the belief in what they “can do”. I will now analyze the narratives of Robyn, Sarah, and Tara by examining the perceived attitudes of the educators that came into contact with their children. To help break down school staff attitudes, based on what I have learned from my three research participants, I will share a gathering of the dismissive attitudes,

assumptions, and examples of the deficit model that school staff have positioned Robyn, Tara, and Sarah.

Being dismissive. To be dismissive is to, “to reject serious consideration of” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). When Robyn began having concerns about Carter's learning, the teacher and the principal became resistant and eventually dismissive to Robyn's concerns. As she began to ask questions and inquire about possible testing of Carter's learning abilities, the attitudes from the principal and the classroom teacher were dismissive. They perpetuated a hierarchy that represented the school staff as the dominant expert. Robyn explained the dismissive attitudes presented to her during a meeting with the school principal: Robyn suggested that Carter have a visual schedule placed on his desk so he was able to check off each class as it was completed and know what was coming up next during his day. The teacher's response was a simple “no”. She said that there was a class schedule on the wall and that should be fine.

If the school staff were led with a service approach to partnering with parents, their attitude towards Robyn would have adjusted their response in support of her request. Further, Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) illustrate the importance for school staff to avoid a dismissive attitude towards parents when they write, “dismissal of their insights further alienate these parents and tends to contribute to their withdrawals from the advocacy role” (p. 116). At this point, it was clear that Robyn was nearing the end of her relationship with the staff at Old Tom School. She would not give up her advocacy role, and she realized that she would have to move Carter to a new school.

The overall attitude of the staff in Sarah's school was of support and service. The principal and teachers understood the importance of being proactive and listening

without judgment. The principal also showed the ability to focus on Sarah's situation and to not generalize her experience with that of other single mothers. LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) go as far as saying the “attitudes and actions of teachers will greatly influence how all parents perceive schools interest in their families and their relation with the school” (p. 118).

Sarah shared her perspective as an educator and her experience working with children who struggle regulating their behaviour. She shared that when the time comes for the school staff to involve the parents, the attitude of the school staff must not convey the message that parents must ‘fix’ their child because the staff are tired of the poor behaviour. Moreover, the attitudes of the school staff must not begin with a superiority that dismisses parent subjectivity. The teacher or the principal calling home must first begin with the attitude that s/he is concerned with (the child's behaviour) and that s/he is looking for parental support to work through these issues. An educator who adopts this positionality in the relationship will provide opportunity for the parents to articulate their needs and fears, and to hear how the staff care and welcome their knowledge in understanding their child.

Making assumptions. To assume is to, “a fact or statement taken for granted” (Merriam- Webster Dictionary, 2017). The last example from Robyn's narrative that addresses the negative attitudes towards her and Carter's experiences at school was when the principal and the teacher were concerned with Robyn's Facebook post. At no time did the principal or the teacher ask why Robyn went on Facebook and posted a question to her friends about what to do with a situation at her son's school. The teacher and the principal's attitude towards Robyn were critical and defensive. In addition, this attitude

was based on the assumption that Robyn was defaming the school staff in some capacity. The principal was more concerned with Robyn's post than how dismissive Carter's teacher was towards the bullying behavior of other students.

In this case, it would be important to clarify why the teacher handled the situation the way she did, and clarify why Robyn had written a post on social media about her problem. It may have been valuable to bring Robyn and the teacher together to clarify their feelings about the problems. This approach to problem solving might portray to Robyn that the principal and teacher value their relationship with Robyn. It is understandable that school staff might not like a parent indirectly speaking about school related concerns on social media, but the principal should have considered asking Robyn why she would rather make a post on Facebook than first coming to speak with the principal. From my perspective, up to this point, when Robyn wanted to speak with the principal or teacher, they did not seem to value her perspectives; therefore there was little value in talking at that point. Although there may be a host of contextual reasons that may explain certain behaviours, miscommunications and misperceptions about actual events (e.g., teachers responding to posts on social media) can prevent or minimize parent participation (Jones *et al.*, 1997). In this case, Robyn felt justified in looking for a new school for Carter. As these stories point out the assumptions that some educators work within, reminds me of an experience I had as a school administrator where a teacher was sharing their assumptions about why a child had not completed the homework. The assumption was made that the mother did not care about her child's reading skills. The teacher did not reach out to the mother. In the end, the child was

hiding the book at school and was not bringing the book home. The parent was not even aware of the necessary homework.

The attitudes of the school principal are paramount to creating a culture among school staff that shows the staff that each parent relationship will be valued. As Tschannen-Moran (2015) notes, “The principal has significant influence on the culture of a school, and the culture of a school is oftentimes reflected in the principal’s values, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 269). Trustworthy relationships take time to cultivate and there will be ups and downs in each relationship. But, the principal should be the person engaging parents in conversations when there is a misunderstanding or a parent concern. This principal/parent engagement will demonstrate to the teachers that the parent/school relationship is important and takes work. The principal's constant engagement with parent conversations portrays a powerful attitude towards school staff. The principal has significant influence on the attitudes, values, and cultures in the school (Tschannen-Moran, 2015).

Deficit model. Tara's story suggests that the deficit model in the parent/school relationship remains prevalent in our schools today. Hornby (2011) writes that “there persists among many teachers a deficit model of parents that is manifested through attitudes whereby parents are viewed as problems, vulnerable, or less able and are therefore best kept out of schools” (p. 19). In Tara's narrative, the school staff had little expectations for Tara and her children. The principal and the teacher held minimal expectations of the children of a single mother on social assistance, attitudes based on stereotypes, and they showed disrespect for the individual parent.

At times, Tara felt that Dawson's teacher had a negative attitude toward her. For example, this occurred when Tara felt Dawson's teacher did not appreciate that Tara was dropping Dawson off in the school when he was wearing his cast. I am reminded that, "it is essential that teachers examine their attitudes to ensure that as much as possible their actions are not driven by stereotypes and preconceived notions about the students and their parents" (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011, p. 121). There are many assumptions present among the educators in Tara's narrative that continue to marginalize Tara and her family, making it difficult for her to feel respected as a single mother. These assumptions create a climate of disconnection between the school and the single mother.

As Tara continued to share her story, it became apparent that the staff at Arlington School contributed the bare minimum in working with Tara. At no point during her children's experience at the school, did she meet with a school team to discuss how to address Dawson's behaviour. Their attitudes were paralyzing for Tara, as she moved to the point of not knowing what to do to support her own children, even though the guiding principles of holding an inclusive team approach are expected in the province of Manitoba (Appropriate Educational Programing, 2006).

As the three conversations with Tara progressed, I found it difficult as a researcher and as a principal to learn about what I consider to be the constant mistreatment by Dawson's teacher and principal towards this family. If Tara had a partner, and her family had social capital, would the principal at Arlington have treated her this way? Single mothers who lack resources and who are isolated from affluence in

the community are vulnerable to those whose attitudes of superiority are exploitative or demeaning.

School staff and parents' attitudes must lead us in a progressive direction towards a healthy partnership over each child's education. Our attitudes must reflect a belief that parents understand their children, and that the professional training of educators can provide appropriate supports on how to educate children in a social and academic environment. As soon as educators' attitudes start to privilege their expertise and minimize the knowledge and experience of parents, the relationship is bound to deteriorate. Further, it is important for the child to see and hear their teacher and parent(s) working together to serve the child's educational experience. If the child understands that this relationship is negative, this could have an adverse impact on the child's academic and social experiences at school.

Valuing Parent/School Relationship

After spending time looking across each narrative, I realized that Robyn and Tara were clearly not treated as equal partners at their schools. Sarah had essentially a more positive experience working with the leadership in her school, which valued relationships with parents and their contributions to their child's education.

As the three narrative accounts suggest, it is often the case that school personnel, either intentionally or unintentionally, overlook or ignore the value of parental involvement particularly with single-parent families. Core values that are rooted in service must be led by the leadership in the school. To do this effectively, principals must value service and lead by example. As Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) state, "Servant leaders have a desire to make a difference for other people and will pursue opportunities

to impact others' lives never for their own gain" (p. 1). For single parents, this means that educators must move away from a deficit approach of parental engagement towards authentic relationship building based on family needs.

Robyn's experience at Old Tom School speaks to the lack of value educators places on serving her family. Robyn having difficulties securing a meeting time was just one example. In addition, during meetings she was discredited when providing ideas to support Carter in the classroom. For example, Robyn asked if Carter could use the fidget toys she sent to school to help regulate his behavior. The four or five school staff sitting around the table were not in favor of Robyn's suggestion. Robyn thought that the problem was the recommendation she proposed. She decided to make a request and for the teacher to fill out a behaviour checklist for Robyn to take to have further assessments completed privately outside the school system. Unfortunately, the request was denied, which ultimately ended Robyn's attempts to advocate for Carter. This denial further strained the relationship between Robyn and the school staff, and maintained a dominant hierarchy that places the school staff on top. Robyn's departure from the school signals some agency in this scenario, and that she has choice and power to leave the relationship if it is not working for her. Schools, in the current era of neoliberalism and competition, may wish to re-think these marginalizing moments when it comes to retaining students for their school budgets and for the promotion of their school image as being open and community minded.

When Robyn moved Carter to the New School, Robyn was impressed with the principal. The principal remembered Robyn and Carter from a previous visit and came to introduce herself at the school picnic. For Robyn, at the New School, a simple handshake

and the remembering of her name, helped her begin a positive relationship with the principal.

Robyn's new relationship with the New School continued to grow when they politely reminded her to use the communication book rather than emailing the teacher every day. It is paramount to note that the teacher did not have a negative attitude towards Robyn. The teacher valued Robyn's input into Carter's education. It was clear at this point to Robyn that a foundation for a partnership was beginning to form. Feeling valued was important to Robyn as together, with the school staff, they moved forward on appropriate educational programming for Carter. This urgency to form a foundation showed up elsewhere in the study in Sarah's narrative. Sarah was appreciative when the principal frequently checked in with Sarah to let her know how her children were doing at school. This suggests that the study participants are seeking a steady form of support.

Again, in Tara's narrative it was clear that throughout her journey in trying to participate in her child's education, she was not valued as an individual or as a parent. For example, Tara shared with the principal that when Dawson got mad at home, he was able to go to his room and calm down within a couple minutes. She asked the principal if it was possible to arrange a spot in the school where Dawson could go to calm down. Using her authority over Tara, the principal declined to give Dawson this space, and Tara believed that s/he was not interested in serving Dawson's needs. Tara felt hopeless and frustrated in this situation.

Some concern over the lack of empathy for children with behavioural difficulties is found in this example. A principal who leads with service will treat these instances as teachable moments in order to work with children to curb or repair the harm done by

their behaviour. Behaviour plans should be put in place after multiple team meetings where the parent is a contributing member of the team. This team approach to handling student behaviour is clearly outlined in the handbook titled *Appropriate Educational Programming* (2006), written for implementation in all Manitoba public schools:

Behaviour intervention planning involves a process of school and community team members coming together to develop an understanding of the student's behaviour difficulties and a plan to address the student's needs that are underlying the behaviour.

Behaviour intervention planning also involves a product, often a written document that identifies proactive and reactive intervention strategies along with specific indicators of student success that will permit ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the plan. (p. 83)

Therefore improving Dawson's behaviour at school should include Tara, the resource teacher, the classroom teacher, and the principal. The process for establishing a plan is inclusive of parents, which demonstrates that school members value parental input and that the child's progress is of primary concern.

Sarah's narrative provided excellent examples of the role the principal should play in embodying servant leadership to parents. The principal valued a proactive approach to communicating with parents. As Sarah shared, the principal supported her with every opportunity including making sure she was safe during times that her ex-husband showed up at the school.

Valuing the parent/school relationship is foundational to a successful partnership between parents and schools. Barbuto and Wheeler (2007) express the importance for the principal in living this core value. Teachers and support staff need to see leader's actions reflect this significance. If the actions reflect this importance, the experiences that parents have will provide the potential growth of a partnership. In this current study, there were incidences of positive and negative relationships with the school principal, and there were consequences as a result. Leithwood *et al.* (2010) discussed how valuable the role of the principal is in building family partnerships when they write: "It is the principal's personal behaviors and attitudes about community and parent influence that make significant contributions to parent and community engagement in schools" (p. 625). In this article, it was further discussed that the teachers' belief in valuing parental involvement only grew if the teachers understood that it was part of the philosophy of the school culture. The principal plays a significant role in building a foundation of trust between parents and school staff. To this end, the principal is the cement for building a foundational culture among staff about serving students and their families. The following section will attend to my second research puzzle that focuses on the *impact* of Robyn, Tara, and Sarah's experiences with their child's school.

Impact of Experiences

The impact on Robyn, Tara, and Sarah were all dramatically different. As I have mentioned earlier, individual stories are unique. With this said, the impact of our stories on ourselves, are too unique. As I read each participant's narrative over and over, I naturally reflected on their experiences through the lens of my experiences as a researcher, parent, principal, and a child that was raised by his single mother. Therefore,

my learning's relative to each participant's experiences are unique to me. The impact of my story that I shared in the opening chapter was profound enough to lead me to completing this research decades later. It is important that educators are aware that their relationships or lack thereof, have profound impacts on parents and children outside of the school walls.

Robyn expressed the negative impact that her experience at Old Tom School had on her. During our second conversation, she expressed that she was very emotionally and physically tired. This was because she would stay up late trying to figure out how to advocate for her son to make sure his needs were met at school. Robyn also shared that in combination with the lack of sleep she was experiencing, she was also not eating healthy and not exercising anymore. Robyn's overall health was declining and something needed to change.

Robyn spoke about the impact that challenging days at school were also having on Carter at home. Carter would not speak to Robyn about his day during the car ride home from daycare and then when they arrived home he would throw his jacket and backpack at the front door with his shoulders drooping down to show how upset he was. He would get his iPad and tune out everything by playing for at least an hour under his blanket. Carter would repeat this behaviour daily and it was extremely upsetting for Robyn to watch her son emotionally struggle in the evenings based on the events of his school day.

During our third conversation, Robyn expressed that the impact of her poor relationship with the teacher and principal at Carter's school was so debilitating for her that she was on stress leave from work. Robyn did not speak too much of the details of

her leave from work. She did mention that she was hopeful that assessments were going to be completed because Carter was now registered at the New School where the teacher and principal were aware and willing to assess Carter for Autism. Ultimately, the lack of relationship with the staff at Old Tom School wore Robyn down emotionally and physically.

When talking with Tara about the impact that her relationship with the staff at her children's school was having on her, she was now ready to look for work. The year prior to our sit down conversation, Tara completed her Grade 12 education and recently graduated with her diploma. Unfortunately, there was an additional problem that impeded Tara from applying for jobs. There was a high frequency of calls from the school during the day to inform her of her child's misbehaviour. In addition, Tara frequently had to pick up Dawson from school because the school was not dealing with his behaviour. It was clear that it would be extremely difficult to hold down a job if the school was regularly calling her during the day to talk or asking her to come and pick up her son.

As shared earlier in chapter 4, Tara was concerned that the principal would call Child and Family Services with concerns about Tara. She shared that she knew that someone from the school had once called CFS and that she was concerned someone else from the school would call CFS again. This was taking an emotional toll on Tara. She admitted it was challenging to manage the behaviour of her two boys but she was doing the best she could. It was clear that Tara's level of self-efficacy was low. She expressed a number of times during our conversations that she was doing the best she could and I believed her. Reflecting on the literature review in chapter 2, Hoover-Dempsey and

Sandler (1995, 1997, 2005) discuss the impact that a parent's self-efficacy has on their involvement in a child's education. It is discussed that the foundational level to a parent's decision to be involved is based on their own personal belief that they can contribute. It is clear that Tara's experiences with the principal and teachers have stripped her of believing that she is able to contribute to her son's education. When an individual calls CFS to investigate the behaviours of a parent, it strikes a blow to the parent's self-efficacy in raising children.

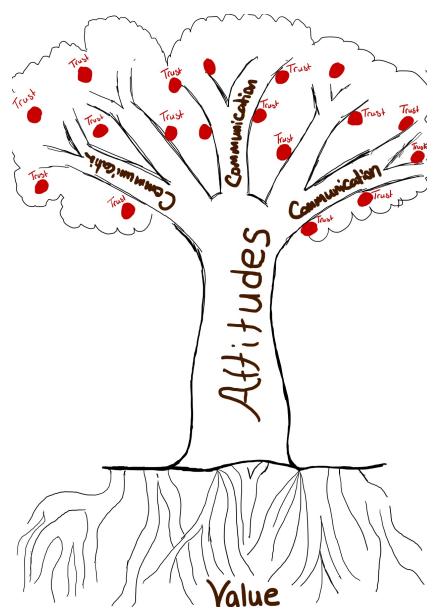
On the contrary, Sarah's experiences with her children's school had a very positive impact on Sarah and her children. Each time we met, she showed that she was emotionally happy with the staff at her child's school by expressing how good she was feeling. The challenging times for Sarah during our conversations came from sharing the abusive moments in her marriage. Sarah was able to process those emotions because she did not have additional relationship challenges in her life like Robyn and Tara. Further emotional challenges came during our rereading of her narrative that I wrote and the specific sections that were emotional were the written example of the abuse she experienced. Sarah expressed that she did not have anything bad to say about the staff at her children's school. As I wrote in her narrative she felt that her children were safe at school and she trusted the teachers, especially the principal. As a result of these positive relationships with the staff at her children's school, her evenings were full with her children participating in extracurricular activities, and the conversations around the dinner table about school were positive. Sarah and her children were receiving adequate sleep at night. Overall, Sarah was very happy and as she said, she was proud to be a single mother.

It was evident that if a mother was having a difficult relationship with the school staff at their child's school, the emotional impact was dramatic in the role it played in their family outside the school walls. It is important that school staff consider the impact that their relationships with children and parents can have on individuals outside of the school environment. This impact might be relative of the position of power and influence that educators carry in this relationship. Furthermore, this impact speaks to the importance that educators understand how the power, language, and subjectivities have on individuals and their emotional well-being.

Reshaping School Operations Through Building Trusting Relationships

Using the findings that addressed my first two research puzzles, it was apparent to me that the tapestries of value, attitude, and communication were interdependent to each other. The three narratives that I have shared speak to the need to reshape school operations around parent/school relationships. These narratives have also provided an emphasis on the importance for educators and parents to build trusting relationships. Sarah's narrative demonstrates how principals and teachers can lead with a servant leadership framework that builds trusting relationships with families. When this approach is taken, parents, such as Sarah, are less likely to feel the power imbalance between educators and parents.

To help illustrate my points around reshaping school operations, I have included an image of an apple tree to represent the growth of these tapestries leading to a tree baring apples of trust.



Sketch By: Colin Campbell, 2017

At the bottom of the apple tree, the roots must be grounded in valuing parent/school staff. This step first begins with the leaders in the building having conversations with staff about the value of these special relationships and how staff can implement these relationships as part of the school culture. Based on the synthesis of the narratives that have been shared, when a school values family relationships with school staff, the attitudes of the school staff follow what is being valued. For example, staff will speak in the hallways and in the staffrooms about the importance of these relationships with families. When staff attitudes reflect the value of family relationships, communication between the partners (home and school) commences with a respectful partnership tone. This tone is represented in the thickness of the communication branches. The more branches in the tree of trust, the more effective staff are at communicating in a manner that does portray the staff as experts in all facets of child development. Communication by staff is made with a focus on understanding parents and their children from the perspective of the child's loving parents. If all these tapestries can work interdependently with each other, the tree of trust will establish plenty of

trusting apples to encourage further respectful and inclusive relational experiences for families. The tapestries of value, attitude, and communication do not naturally turn into trust. This takes time and nurturing of the relationships for that to happen. When building a trusting relationship, a school must first value this relationship by nurturing it with respectful attitudes and communication. For example, conversations in the hallways and staffrooms between staff about parents revolve around service and facts, not assumptions and judgments. Further, communication with parents is multidimensional from listening empathetically to asking questions. Communication does not lead with telling parents what they need to be doing to parent their child, as this will likely lead to experiences of distrust.

A relational experience can either leave individuals with a feeling of trust, or on the contrary, mistrust. Kochanek (2005) provides key components to trust building around interactions between people as either, low-risk or high-risk interactions. Low-risk exchanges are social in nature and are simple conversations. High-risk interactions are the more formal meetings that might take place in a school such as grade level meetings or parent teacher meetings. Kochanek explains that everyone has their own base state of trust or a trust history that people create based on previous communicational exchanges. Our base state of trust has an impact on where we are comfortable starting exchanges on a low-risk to high-risk scale of interaction. Kochanek's point resonates with this study. The school personnel with whom Robyn and Tara engaged would have benefited from understanding the difference between low-risk and high-risk conversations. It is clear, for instance, that the principals and teachers were not aware of Robyn and Tara's base level

of trust, and were not interested in learning about the realities of the family environment in order to attempt alternative supports.

The lack of effort on behalf of the principals to build a trusting relationship may speak to the fear of giving up power in decision-making. Principals might worry about the end results and how far the shift in power might go. As a principal, I have heard colleagues say they do not want parents telling them what to do in *their* school. In addition, the principals described in Robyn and Tara narratives, signal an interest in building trusting relationship but lack the professional capacity to know how to build such a relationship. Leadership training might be a useful starting point in this regard.

My own relational experiences of living through my parents' divorce have impacted my sensitivity to loss, and ability to trust new relationships. Both my mother and I start our relationships with low base states of trust because of our experiences. Put differently, being sensitive to loss also means that my mother and I are also sensitive to gaining and losing trust in relationships. One underlying tapestry that each mother in this study experienced directly or indirectly was an increase, or decrease, of mistrust in parent/teacher relationships. The impact of mistrust or trust building was unique for each mother.

Trust in a Relationship

It is difficult to establish one distinct definition for the term trust. This is due to a number of contributing factors in creating trust or mistrust. Turnbull *et al.* (2011) explain four practices that will enable school staff to create trusting relationships with parents to partner with schools. These practices are: be reliable, use sound judgment, maintain confidentiality, and trust yourself. These four practices are embedded in the impact that

the relationship between each participant and their child's school staff had on each parent.

A person is known to be reliable when s/he puts words into action. Making sound judgment decisions takes place daily in a school. For example, making the “right” decisions regarding student behaviour, academics, and safety are a few of the judgments that school staff make. Maintaining confidentiality refers to the respect provided to every student, parent, and confidential, respectful treatment of the private information that they share with the school. Their information should not be discussed in staffrooms, hallways, or in after school conversations with staff. Last, trusting yourself refers to having the self-efficacy in communicating with parents. Trusting yourself is paramount to believing that one can actually carry out the appropriate partnership with parents (Turnbull *et al.* 2011). Therefore, when a principal attempts to build a trusting relationship with parents, it is a sign that the principal first has the self-efficacy to build trusting relationships with parents. If a principal has established a strong level of self-efficacy there is the likelihood that the collective self-efficacy of the staff will increase in building trusting relationships with parents.

Reliability. There were two moments in Robyn's narrative when the staff at Old Tom School were not reliable. The first time was when Mr. McKay told Robyn that Carter would be a great candidate for the Hockey Program at the school but was later denied. The second time was when the teacher was not going to be able to complete a checklist of Carter's behaviour because she had expressed that there were children in her class that were ‘worse off’. Both these examples were the first experiences that began to lay a foundation for mistrust between Robyn and the staff. Robyn described these two

experiences as being disheartening and frustrating. She felt it was not fair to be told one thing and then all of a sudden be told another thing. This mistrust led to Robyn pushing even harder for assessments to be completed for Carter because she did not feel that the school believed her or was looking out for the best interest of her son. From my perspective, the more Robyn pushed, the stronger the resistance from the staff. Further, the principal might have made an important difference if there was focus on Robyn as an individual and attempted to consider some of her feedback and ideas.

At Arlington School, the principal struggled tremendously to show Tara that she could count on her. The statement that emphasized this feeling was when the principal told Tara that she was not going to call Child and Family Services because they were now working together. This example, deviates from Turnbull et al. (2011) explanation of what it means to be reliable, “to be reliable you first must believe that it is important to be reliable” (p. 153). A principal who is in a position of power cannot project to parents that they are reliable when projecting to parents a statement that felt more like a threat as Tara experienced. The impact on Tara was surprising. Tara was accustomed to been treated this way so she was clearly happy that the principal did not call CFS. This suggests to me that Tara is not able to count on this principal and as a result, it was difficult to build trust in a relationship.

As a parent, Tara's experience in working with educators did not improve from when she was the student. To this end, as Tara's story reached Arlington School, she had experiences as a student and parent that led to Tara's base state of trust beginning very low.

From my perspective, the principal seemed to always be involved in supporting Sarah with the difficult times she experienced at the school. For example, during the kindergarten graduation, he was there to support her during the DVD argument, and that they would make her daughter a new DVD. When Sarah came rushing in to pick up her children because she was afraid her ex partner was on his way to the school, the principal was there to support and take direction from her. Sarah had experienced reliability from the formal authority in the building, the principal. There was a positive impact on Sarah when working with a principal who is reliable, which allowed Sarah to feel comfortable to speak from the heart with him. She felt safe and by association, she felt her children would be safe at school.

Sound judgment. Carter's Grade 3 teacher struggled to use sound judgment when dealing with the social problems that Carter was experiencing when wearing pink. The teacher lacked empathy by simply telling Carter to not wear pink if he does not like being teased about it. As Robyn shared, this moment in the teacher/student relationship irked her because it was clear that the teacher was not willing to provide support for Carter, as the teacher just simply wanted the problem to go away. The impact on Robyn was dramatic and led to further conversations with the principal after attempting to provide clarity on the issue by using her friends on Facebook for support. Robyn shared that, after this issue with the classroom teacher, she did not feel Carter was safe at Old Tom School.

Parents want to trust that the staff at the school where their children attend will make every effort to make sound judgment in the decisions that they make. From my perspective, Dawson's teacher, principal, and resource teacher were not making sound

decisions in regards to Dawson's experiences at school. At one point in the second conversation with Tara, I had heard her share 3 or 4 examples of Dawson misbehaving at school. The examples of misbehaviour warranted trips to the office to talk with the principal on multiple occasions. As Tara continued to share the behavioural challenges that Dawson was experiencing, it dawned on me that Tara had not talked about a behaviour plan for improving Dawson's behaviour. She shared that she had never heard of a behaviour plan for Dawson. She further shared that she only meets with the principal to talk discipline.

As a principal, I know that it is extremely difficult to make sound decisions. If a student is continually finding her/himself in the principal's office as a result of poor behavioural choices at school, it is the responsibility of the principal to put forth every effort to teach the student positive behaviour. Resolving student behaviour is a process and as explained earlier, in accordance with the *Appropriate Educational Planning* (2006) document, the process is a team based approach. This includes, parents, resource teacher, principal, teacher, and any other additional support staff needed. The principal with whom Tara was trying to work was not making sound decisions when dealing with Dawson's behaviour. S/he was simply handing out discipline in a reactive manner. The right approach would have been to establish a team to manage Dawson's behaviour. This principal's approach of working with Dawson can also push blame on Tara to fix her child's behaviour at school.

Sarah shared examples of the principal or teachers making sound decisions and at times those decisions were made quickly and during the heat of the moment. As Turnbull et al. (2011) share, "families will trust you if they can rely on your good judgment in

such matters as curriculum, instruction, assessment, discipline, social relationships, and particularly safety” (p. 153). During the example of the parent teacher interviews, when Sarah's ex-husband was speaking in an inappropriate tone to the teachers and complaining about miscommunication, the teacher made the judgment call to not respond defensively but to let him finish talking and at the end of the meeting decided to implement a two mailbox system for their child to avoid any perceived future problems. The teacher could have easily maintained her position in power and told Sarah and her ex-partner to figure out school communication on their own.

The impact on Sarah with this decision was a sense of relief. She did not have to ask the school to change their communication practices. The teacher recognized a problem and made a very sound decision to serve both parents. Again, the sound judgment made by the teacher increased the level of trust between Sarah and her relationship with her child's school.

Maintaining confidentiality. Maintaining privacy is vital when trying to build trust in a relationship. On one occasion when Robyn was talking to Carter's classroom teacher in the hallway about his day, she noticed another teacher walk by and out of the corner of Robyn's eye she could see the other teacher rolling her eyes to Carter's teacher. This had obviously frustrated Robyn and added more doubt in the confidentiality of her relationship with Carter's teacher. From Robyn's perspective, she left feeling as if Carter's teacher was discussing Robyn's situation with other teachers. Robyn was feeling like she was the topic of conversation in the staffroom. Whether or not this was the case, this slight inappropriate eye rolling gesture emphasizes the continued unprofessional use of power amongst the staff at Old Tom School.

The impact that Robyn's experiences with the staff at Carter's school were immense. She was feeling depressed, sleeping a lot, experiencing unhealthy eating habits, and she had to take time off work. The need for several lengthy meetings and the requirement for Robyn to share private information about her family were having a negative impact on her life. She felt that there was not much more that she could do. Thankfully, Robyn was able to change schools for Carter.

There was a significant moment during our conversations when Tara shared that her confidentiality was compromised at Arlington School. Tara took the initiative to come to the school and talk with the (new) principal and discuss the custody arrangements between Tara and her ex-partner. Tara explained that she has always had full custody of Dawson but there is no formal legal documentation of this arrangement. Unfortunately, lacking any care and consideration the principal did not ask Tara into her office to speak privately about the personal matters. Instead, this conversation occurred in the foyer of her office where other staff members listened to Tara share private information. To compound this problem, ironically, her ex-partner showed up at the office at the same time because he has additional children from a new relationship attending the same school. The principal smirked at Tara suggesting that Tara had set this up. Tara shared with me how belittled she felt. She felt that the principal thought she was annoying her with her comments. Tara left the office feeling like there was no point in talking to this principal again.

By the end of writing Sarah's narrative, she was unable to prove that what she shared with the principal that day stayed confidential. Reading her narrative and listening

to how she describes the principal as caring, understanding, and nonjudgmental, it can be assumed that Sarah's conversations stayed private.

Further, if some of Sarah's experiences were shared with staff, it can be assumed that the principal was sharing the information with the right people to help serve Sarah. At no time did Sarah share a misuse of power and influence by a staff member from the school. Power was used to balance conversations and to serve Sarah where she was at, while continually building trust with her. The impact on Sarah was of thankfulness that she was not one that experienced an abuse of power from school staff.

Capacity to care. In Robyn's case, from the bottom of her heart she could not bring herself to believe that the staff at the school was working in the “best interest of others”. From Robyn's perspective, the school was working in the best interest of themselves and was lacking the capacity to care for Robyn and her son. Turnbull et al. (2011) share that parents must know that staff will “act in the best interest of others who trust you and that you will make good efforts to follow through on your word” (p. 155).

From my perspective, as a school principal, it was evident that the school showed multiple times that their level of care consisted of looking out for themselves and they were willing to make excuses to not serve Robyn. Sipe and Frick (2009) talk about the value and importance of showing care and concern in servant leadership. They explain that, “genuine care and concern are expressed through actions” (p. 44). As a principal, agreement on all requests from parents is not realistic, but it is paramount that the principal or designate provide reasonable reasons for not being able to complete a parent's request. Further, it might be prudent for principals to provide opportunity for parents to recognize when a request has been met. This can provide the parent with a

sense of value and feeling that the principal does care. In other words, a principal might consider monitoring the number of opportunities that they have said “yes” to a parent's request. This might help alleviate a one sided approach to the principal/parent partnership. A verbal or non-verbal response to a request from a parent should not be dismissive. These responses will only provide resentment and increase the opportunity for mistrust and disconnection to develop.

In my evaluation of Dawson's teacher and principal, it appears that they lack what Turnbull et al. (2011) describe as the “capacity to care for and not harm what others entrust to you” (p. 155). It is difficult to measure capacity without actually interviewing the people (principal & teacher) whose capacity is being assessed. With this said, the capacity of the principal dealing with children similar to Dawson might be very low.

The problem with lacking the capacity to work with Dawson means that the focus from the school can shift to the parent and insinuating that they need to fix their child. Lacking capacity to work with specific children that are required to fit within a fixed institution, such as the school system, does not create trust. When parents drop their child off at school they want to know that their child's needs are going to be met, even if their child is causing trouble. The school is ultimately responsible for ALL students.

Turnbull et al. (2011) speak about the importance for staff to develop self-efficacy in the areas of parental involvement. A high level of self-efficacy will provide staff with the confidence to ask questions of parents and to learn more about their child to help meet their child's needs inside the classroom. As Sarah shared her positive level of care that she felt from the school, it was clear that the principal led this way. Without interviewing the principal with whom Sarah worked, it is difficult to establish the level

of self-efficacy he has in the area of parental involvement. With the confidence in which Sarah spoke about this principal, it is evident that he is willing to treat Sarah for who she is, her children as individuals, and is willing to listen to her requests and try to serve Sarah. Listening to Sarah share the positive relationships she experienced with the staff, led by the principal, I wonder if the staff in this school has a strong capacity and potential to care for families? The challenge might be to obtain buy-in, which will require steady leadership. Steady leadership is built on trust between the teachers and the principal. It is important that teachers believe that the principal will walk with them through new understandings in building capacity within staff. This is supported by Louis (2007), who writes about teachers' decisions about their principal's trustworthiness. Louis (2007) writes that teachers are looking for a principal who shares power, is honest, caring, and has integrity. This is similar to what Robyn, Tara, and Sarah were expressing as strengths or weaknesses of their principal. This suggests that parents too have concerns with trustworthiness with school leaders.

The principal's ability to serve Sarah provided opportunity for her to build trust as the foundation to their communication. The principal always told Sarah to call anytime and the impact that those simple words had on Sarah was comforting for her to hear. These words provided Sarah with the opportunity to enjoy her own day at work. To not worry about the safety of her children at school. She trusted the principal and the children's teachers based on their willingness to partner with Sarah and her family.

Conclusions

The narratives from Robyn, Sarah, and Tara provide lived experiences from single mothers that speak to the work that educators need to improve in building trusting

relationships with them. As a result of this research, and as a school principal, I have had to work with teachers to deconstruct their discourse around the lives single mothers live. Each participant's story in this research provided insights into specific areas educators might misunderstand in the lives single mothers live.

In Robyn's narrative, the staff appeared to listen to her speak as a "mother" and not as a mother who was a professional educator. Robyn had significant training and education to support children. I believe that this had a negative impact on Robyn's ability to convince the teachers and principal to take seriously her professional opinions and view her outside of the single mother narrative.

In addition, educators may consider the possibility that a single mother that they are trying to build a relationship with may have experienced an abusive partner. Each time Sarah spoke to the abuse she experienced, it was visibly clear that reflecting on this time in her life brought back sensitivities within relationships. It is important for educators to widen their lens to the possibility that abuse can happen and adaptations should be considered when trying to build a trusting relationship with single mothers.

Currently, the term "instructional leadership" (Hattie 2009, 2015) is used regularly to describe the role of the principal in the twenty-first century educational leadership. Based on this study, I wonder if there is room to improve this term to present a more collaborative leadership approach for principals' leading schools. Peter Dewitt's book titled *Collaborative Leadership* (2017), discusses the role of the principal in a much more dynamic and broader sense. He writes that "[c]ollaborative leadership embodies the instructional focus, the deep and mastery notion, and the self-learning notion but centers on enhancing learning" (p. ix). I want to focus on the enhancing

learning portion of his definition. Enhancing learning does not mean only academic student learning. It necessitates that all stakeholders must be involved in a child's education. This includes the principals, teachers, support staff, and parents. A principal's role should focus on collaborative leadership that looks at building capacity in staff for teaching and learning but also addresses the needs of families in a collaborative partnership. This approach is important because it shares power. A collaborative approach to leadership removes the principal or teacher as the one with all the answers. This shared power can bring parents into the equation to serving students rather than pushing them away.

Recommendations

At a foundational level, school staff must first value the importance of having a respectful relationship with each child's parent(s). Once staff begin to value this vital relationship, the attitudes towards the individuality of each relationship begin to develop. With the right attitude presented in this relationship, the stage is set for appropriate communication. Dependent on the level of appropriate communication, this will influence the level of trust that can be established.

As I listened to each participant's story it became clear that as individuals, we each have our base state of trust when we enter a relationship. School staff must pay acute attention to each parent's level of base trust and of their life situations. This awareness will direct how to enter this trusting relationship. Educators must also recognize their position of power and authority in these trusting relationships. Passing judgment and homogenizing groups of parents will only create a relationship built on mistrust and lack a healthy partnership with students' parents.

Based on the narratives shared in this research, a re-vision of the role of the school principal is important to stress. There is a social competence that should be considered when hiring principals. If research suggests that parental involvement is important to student success at school, then hiring principals who understand how building partnerships with families should be a priority. This is important because these skills that potential principal candidates possess will help build trusting relationships with parents, if hired.

Based on what I have learned from these three narratives, I have two important recommendations for future research. The first is how to build capacity in the principal and vice principal (administrative) roles to lead schools of service? Administration must learn to understand the value and purpose of serving the diversity of families attending public schools. I feel this study provides excellent examples of *what* school administration can improve on in building partnerships with families. A possible next step might be to use these narratives from this research to inquire into *how* administrators can lead staff in building capacity in teachers to serve families?

After addressing with administration the educational discourse around single mothers, building capacity in administrators might first begin with attending to the bottom of the Fruit Tree of Trust. Initial discussions around family partnerships should address the purpose of building and maintaining trusting partnerships with families, which is connected to the values for “why” it is important. This is labeled as the roots of the tree. When problems occur in building these relationships, leadership can always return their focus back to the vision for building them. For example, an administrator's original vision might be for the school staff to strive to serve students, families, and

community. These values are led and modeled by the principal and need to be written down in either a mission statement or belief statements. This is done to reference regularly as a shared purpose with all staff.

After establishing a purpose and value (roots) for building trusting partnerships with parents, focus can now move to the attitudes that staff should maintain and some attitudes that should be avoided. Establishing a servant leadership approach (Sipe & Frick, 2009) may possibly reduce the use of negative attitudes built on assumptions and stereotypes discussed in chapter 5. As a result, this speaks to the importance of establishing the appropriate purpose and values to building trusting relationships. As educators, our attitudes are going to be a work in progress. We need to collaborate together, including the principal in the collaboration process, by maintaining focus on the values.

Aligning the staff attitudes with the values will hopefully provide opportunity for communication to reflect what Turnbull et al. (2011) discuss as focusing on; being friendly, listening, being clear, being honest, and providing and coordinating information (p. 139). Communicating with this focus will encourage the Fruit Tree of Trust to begin bearing trustful fruit, which will blossom based on how well the staff are led by the principal in maintaining reliability, capacity to care, making sound judgments, and maintaining confidentiality towards parents.

The metaphor for using a fruit tree to represent a possible process for building trusting parent partnerships goes beyond simply the four focused areas discussed. Most importantly, a tree and its growth are cyclical in nature. For example, fruit might be visible at the top of the tree, but as the tree bears fruit, it is constantly going back to its

roots for nourishment to encourage more growth. This process should be the same for building trusting partnership with parents. Even though a principal and/or the staff feel that they are taking the right steps to improve family partnerships, staff always need to regularly refer back to their roots (values and purpose) for building these partnerships. This is done to assess progress, maintain strengths and adapt any areas of weaknesses

Implications

Based on this research, there are two implications. The first implication is around future teacher education. The second implication addresses further research focusing on school/family partnerships.

Implication for Teacher Education

Teacher education might lead to the design of a mandatory course that addresses the theoretical and practical approach to building trusting partnerships with families. Using research to design a course might first begin by speaking with the diversity of parents that have children in the public school system. Then seek out perspectives from teachers and administration on what they would like teacher candidates to learn regarding building trusting partnerships with families. Finally, the research would involve speaking to the teacher candidates that have already graduated and are teaching in a classroom. Asking them what they would have liked in a course to inquire into educators partnering with families. After the research has been completed, a possible course might be created involving an inquiry approach to teaching this course. It might be productive to have students create their own inquiry question(s) around building trusting partnerships with families. Students would establish their inquiry questions, then using current research unpack the theory to address their questions. The practical

experiences for teacher candidates should first take place during initial teacher education. Parents from diverse backgrounds can be brought in to speak to teacher candidates and share their narratives around parent partnerships with school. After teacher candidates have had a chance to listen to a diversity of families share their stories, they will take this practical information and find threads between theory and practice. The hope for this approach is to provide teacher candidates with perspectives and ideas to build their own trusting relationships with families.

Implications for Future Research

As mentioned in my recommendations, building capacity within principals and vice principals is an area of consideration. There are implications that should be considered when building capacity in school administrators. Looking beyond the scope of single mothers, it is imperative for administration to be aware of the sensitivities in partnering with additional minority families such as refugee families, single fathers, and foster families, just to name a few. Building capacity within school administrators will help them to build capacity in teachers, supporting them while they too build partnerships with all families, creating inclusive schools.

Further Thoughts

When recalling the stories shared by Robyn, Tara, and Sarah, I reflected on my own mother's lived experiences. My mother always worked extremely hard and rarely complained, but it was not until I listened to each participants' story that I realized the stereotypes and biases she must have faced within the public education system. Reflecting on my experiences as a child, it was apparent that there must have been assumptions made towards my lived experiences.

The principal remained in a dominant position of power in all three narratives. A number of times, participants referenced the principal throughout their story. This was unique because the questions asked did not always reference the principal in the first place. In addition, each participant referenced their initial time they met the principal. What stood out to me was, after each initial conversation with the principal, each participant either left feeling valued or devalued. For this, I now walk into my office understanding the position I am in as a male, person of privilege, holding a position of power as a school principal. This means that I first must understand my positionality; I must first listen to parents and make collaborative decisions based on facts and the needs of families and their children.

After completing this research, as a school principal, my own capacity to serve single mothers has grown. At the school I lead, there is a single mother who struggled to send her children to school. Prior to this research I would have felt empathetic towards her, feeling that there was not much I could do to help her out. Now, living a new version of my life that has been directly impacted by this research, I know I can serve this single mother even more directly than prior to this research.

As a school team, I met with all the staff concerned about this family. I led the conversation to a point of action and understanding that this mother simply needs our help to get her children to school and after our initial service, she "can do this". As a result, our resource teacher, the mother, and myself built a plan. This plan began with myself, the principal, and the resource teacher picking up and driving the children to school for one week. The second week, we walked with the mother and her children to the bus stop and this lasted for two weeks. The third week, we walked with the mother

and the children to the bus every other day. The days that we were not physically walking with the mother and the children to the bus stop, we were sitting in the car watching to see if the walk was successful. During the days that the walk was not successful, we stepped out of our cars and joined them on their walk to the school bus. We stayed at this stage for two more weeks. The last and final week, the resource teacher and myself waited at school with rewards for the children if they would walk to the bus stop with their mother without any altercations.

Currently, as I write these concluding thoughts, the boys are attending school regularly; the mother has secured a job in town and has now saved enough money to purchase a vehicle for her family. This new process that I lead for serving single mothers would not have come to fruition without the stories shared by Robyn, Tara, and Sarah. I am left forever remembering the comment that Sarah made during our final conversation. Sarah said that she was proud to be a single mother, and despite the struggles, there are benefits to living life as a single mother. This is now what I would like all single mothers to believe.

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